

# Who Is This?

Job 19:23-27, Luke 9:1-17 (ESV)

March 27, 2005

“John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” “Who is this?” Already during the earthly life of Jesus Christ, questions were being raised about his identity, and already during his earthly life, answers were being given in terms of life, death, and new life. “It was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen.” So even before Easter, the categories of Easter, of death and resurrection, were being used to understand who Jesus was. They misunderstood him at that time, thinking he was someone else, but in a way they were on the right track. Jesus does have to do with life, death, and new life, and he cannot be understood apart from that.

Herod said, “John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” Soon enough, he would cooperate with Pontius Pilate in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, still not knowing the answer to his own question. “Who is this?” Surely his question is our question. That is why Luke recorded it for us. “Who is this?” There could be no more important question in our lives. Living on this side of Easter, we can know the right answer. Living on this side of Easter, we can know who he is. Living on this side of Easter, we can know who we are in relation to who he is. Living on this side of Easter, we can hear the gospel proclaimed as it could not be before then. So let us pursue the Easter answer to Herod’s question.

“John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” Luke has already told us that Jesus is the son of King David—understanding, of course, that many generations of “greats” and “grands” have been left out of this expression—the son of father Abraham, the son of Adam, and, infinitely more importantly, the Son of the Most High God. I rehearse these simply to remind us that the other answers available to Herod were wrong. “Who is this?” “It was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen.” Even these wrong answers are helpful to us.

As we pursue the Easter answer to Herod’s question, it is good for us to know that Jesus is not John the Baptist. John came before Jesus. John prepared the way for Jesus. John preached good news to the people. John suffered and died before Jesus, pointing ahead to the suffering and death of Jesus. But Jesus was not John.

It is good for us to know also that Jesus is not Elijah. Elijah was the great prophet of the Old Testament, a mighty contender against paganism and evil kings. Elijah did not even die, but was carried into heaven in a chariot of fire. His return was prophesied and expected before the great and awesome day of the LORD. But Jesus was not Elijah. Instead, John was Elijah, as it were, so that his arrival before the day of the Lord indicates clearly that Jesus is Lord. We shall return to that in a moment. For now, we know that Jesus was not Elijah.

It is good for us to know also that Jesus is not one of the prophets of old. He was not Elisha. He was not Isaiah. He was not Jeremiah. He was not Ezekiel. He was not Daniel or any of the others. The list of the prophets of old is long. Their work in speaking the word of God to the people of God was worthy. But Jesus was not one of them.

“Who is this about whom I hear such things?” We know, of course, that Jesus preached and taught and healed. We know that he commissioned others to preach and heal. We know that he attracted large crowds, which was troublesome to the rulers. We know that he fed the five-thousand. But living on this side of Easter, we know even more. We have already seen that even during the earthly life of Jesus, as questions were being raised about his identity, answers were being given in terms of life, death, and new life. And now we know that those are the right categories and that he has fulfilled them as never before. Jesus, Son of the Most High God—which is another way of saying that he is God—came and lived among us, with us and for us, as one of us. Jesus, born of the virgin Mary—which is another way of saying that he is human—suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. And let me say here that the military forces of the Roman Empire were very good at killing people. There can be no serious doubt about the truth and reality of the death of Jesus Christ.

And now, for the Easter part of this, Jesus, the crucified one—which is another way of saying that he gave himself for us and so was wrongly executed though he had done no wrong—was raised bodily from the dead, though not simply restored to this life but elevated to an even greater life forever beyond the power of death. Alleluia! This is who he is. Again, this explicitly does not mean that he was simply resuscitated or restored to this life. For we understand that he was beyond pain, decay, disease, and death. If he had been only resuscitated to this life, he would have had to have died again. So, it was not a simple resuscitation. But the bodily resurrection does mean that the tomb was empty so that the body which had been there was somehow taken up into whatever his resurrected body was and still is. That sets the Christian faith apart from every other faith, and it provides the indispensable basis for the rest of what I want to say.

“Who is this about whom I hear such things?” Jesus, who was the crucified one, is now also the resurrected one, so he is the living one, the one who now lives eternally with his Father. Herod had no idea. Herod had no clue. But we have the whole truth. So we have the answer to his question. Thanks be to God!

We mentioned earlier that John the Baptist’s fulfillment of the return of Elijah pointed ahead to Jesus as being the Lord. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus fulfill and confirm his lordship. Jesus is Lord! Jesus is God with us and for us. Jesus is the ruler of the universe. Jesus is the ruler of our lives. Part of the Easter answer to Herod’s question is that Jesus the living one is also the Lord. The preacher, teacher, healer about whom he heard, the one who commissioned his followers to preach, the one who was drawing crowds, the one who fed the five-thousand, is also the Lord of the universe. That is more than Herod the tetrarch bargained for. It is, undoubtedly, more than we would have expected. But it is who he is. And it points the way forward to the answer to the question of who we are.

Given the Easter gospel that Jesus the risen and living one is Lord of the universe, we are made to realize that we are not lord of the universe. That is not our responsibility. Those who would lord it over us are not lord of the universe. That is not their prerogative. Given the Easter gospel that Jesus the risen and living one is Lord of the universe, we are set free from all the false claimants to that throne, including ourselves and our enemies. Given the Easter gospel that Jesus the risen and living one is Lord of the universe, we are bound to him, bound tighter than death, bound forever. He is our Lord, and we are therefore his servants, and this is our greatest good, this is our highest joy, this is our only reason for being. He is our Easter Lord, and we are his Easter people. Thanks be to God!

There is at least one more piece of this Easter gospel which we certainly want to share. When God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, he defeated the power of death not for Jesus alone but also for us. When God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, he did so not only to make Jesus alive but also to provide for us the promise and assurance of bodily resurrection to eternal life on the other side of death. The one who raised Jesus Christ from the dead can and will also raise us from the dead. The power of death has been defeated. We are given good hope to look forward to the life beyond.

Thus, this Easter reality of the resurrection of the body rules out the fearful prospect of the sheer annihilation of humanity. One possibility for the end of human life is that we disappear into oblivion, that we cease to exist, that we dissolve into nothingness, that nothing we have said or done means anything, that though we were, we are no longer. That would be horrible. That is one of the great fears of humanity. But the Easter resurrection of Jesus Christ rules that out. The resurrection of the body of the one person of

Jesus Christ means that we are not simply annihilated, that we do not slip away into oblivion, that human life does not end in nothingness, that who we are, what we say, and what we do are not forgotten. The resurrection eliminates that terror of nihilism and thus begins to provide for us the basis for meaning and purpose in this life.

Indeed, the very promise of the life beyond increases the value of life here. If there were no life beyond, it would not matter very much how badly we treat each other. Enemies could be killed with impunity. The poor could be eradicated. The sick and weak could be allowed to die, as we are seeing in our own day. Why would it matter? But the fact that we are building relationships here that will last forever puts everything in a totally different light. The fact that people are of eternal significance to God certainly suggests that they should be of great significance to us. Our great hope for the life to come does not mean that this life does not matter, but means instead that this life matters even more than it would have otherwise. Of course, there are things in this life that we will be grateful to leave behind. But as servants of the living Lord of life, we are eager to do good to one another even here.

In a few moments, a young man will stand before us and profess his faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In so doing, he will not make Jesus his Lord and Savior, but he will instead acknowledge what is already an eternal truth, that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. In so doing, he will not only bind himself to the church of Jesus Christ—for that cannot be separated from making a profession of faith in Jesus Christ—but he will also bind himself to the lordship of Jesus Christ, willingly embracing the reality of his life as a servant of Jesus Christ, which alone is good reason to live. The affirmations he will take are far more important than marriage vows. They are far more important than citizenship vows. These are matters of life, death, and new life. These are Easter affirmations, of an Easter people, to our Easter Lord. And we shall all rejoice with him, reaffirming our own faith, recommitting ourselves to the living Lord of life, becoming an Easter people yet again.

“John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” “It was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen.” “Who is this?” Jesus, who was the crucified one, is now also the resurrected one, so he is the living one, the one who now lives eternally with his Father. And we are his people. Thanks be to God!

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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