

My Client didn't say it!

And if he did say it, it doesn't mean what you think it means.

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Exodus 20:1-17, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, [John 2:13-22](#)

It is a pattern we have all seen by now so often that it has almost become routine. A report comes out that a popular personality – a celebrity or a politician or maybe it is an influential religious person – has said something horrible, awful and egregious – something racist or homophobic or a statement in support of an accused terrorist group.

And what is the first response? It is almost always a firm denial. No, they never said such a horrible, awful thing. Whoever said that they said it is obviously lying. Whoever reported it is only publishing fake news. Nothing to see here!

The Truth Comes Out

Shortly afterwards, almost on cue, what happens? The tape is suddenly released or an unimpeachable witness steps forward. Yes, it turns out, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the beloved personality really did say it.

That should be the end of the story, right? Now that the proof is out in the open, it cannot be denied. So, does the accused finally admit that they were in the wrong? Of course not! No, the next explanation we learn is that, okay, yes, they did say it. But everybody's got it all wrong. They didn't mean it like *that*!

So I guess it turns out that it's actually everybody else's fault, because we all totally misunderstood what this very important person said. If there's any apology at all at this point, the person will apologize for how everyone else misunderstood and misconstrued what they said.

Public Relations Confusion

How often have you seen that same series of events play out in public relations? Sometimes it leads us to real confusion about what the person actually said and what it meant. And sometimes it creates a conversation that might just lead to a better understanding of who they are – for better or for worse.

I was thinking about this kind of drama that regularly plays out in the world of public relations when I read our passage from the Gospel of John this morning. Because it turns out that Jesus himself was once accused of saying something terrible – something that you would think only a terrorist would say. He said that he would destroy the temple in Jerusalem – the central institution of Judean society and that he would rebuild it in three days.

Mark is Adamant!

And the very idea that Jesus could ever even dream of saying such a thing was so unthinkable that the writer of the Gospel of Mark, the first of our gospels ever written, went out of his way to deny it. When Jesus is on trial near the end of the Gospel of Mark, he writes, **“For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him,**



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saying, ‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.”’” (Mark 14:56-58)

Did you catch that? Mark is so sure that Jesus never said anything like that he insists twice that this was **“false testimony.”** Imagine my surprise, therefore, when I turn over to the Gospel of John who reports those very words on Jesus’ own lips: **“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’”**

False Testimony?

And yes, I realize that those are not *exactly* the words that Mark says that Jesus didn’t say. Perhaps they are even different enough that a public relations expert could spin it to say that Mark was technically correct in his previous denials. But is it really different enough for Mark to have insisted so strongly that it was all **“false testimony”**?

So, we are in that place where we so often find ourselves in the world these days when we are given conflicting reports about what some famous person said, and we are left to work out for ourselves what it all really means. And that is, by the way, exactly where the gospel writer of John wants us to be.

A Terrorist Act?

He has done this on purpose to get us thinking about the meaning behind what Jesus is doing. Jesus is, after all, causing a major disturbance in the temple. It is the kind of act that anyone, no matter how sympathetic to Jesus and his cause, would find troubling.

Imagine, for example, if some people went into Dome of the Rock Mosque in Jerusalem today and started turning over tables and whipping people? That would be seen, at the very least, as an act of terrorism. In the present context, it would probably open a new front on the ongoing war. Whatever Jesus may have said on the occasion, what he did in the temple was definitely radical, inflammatory and provocative. And yet, all four gospels agree that he did that.

This is one of Jesus’ more radical moments, and so we absolutely need to come to terms with what it means. The Gospel of John, by insisting that Jesus said what the Gospel of Mark insists that he didn’t say, is quite intentionally forcing us to come to terms with it.

Is it Practical?

So, what does it mean? Is Jesus attacking the temple? He may be doing so symbolically, but the gospel writer seems to want to make it abundantly clear that Jesus is by no means a practical threat to the temple itself. He underlines that fact that, at the time when Jesus’ ministry began, the temple had **“been under construction for forty-six years.”**

The rebuild had been started as a vanity project by Herod the Great and the work would not be completed for nearly as long again after Jesus came, at which point it would be destroyed by Romans, not by Jesus. So, the gospel writer seems to be screaming at his readers, **“Do you know how big and complicated the temple complex was? The very idea that Jesus could destroy it is ridiculous!”**

So, What did he Mean?

So, yes, the point is clear that Jesus cannot mean this literally. But we are still left with the question of how we can understand it. Fortunately, John clears that one up for us too. He tells us what Jesus really meant: **“But he was speaking of the temple of his body.”** He is speaking about his own death and resurrection that will be recounted at the end of this gospel.

But he's also saying more than that. He is looking forward to the time when there will not be a temple in Jerusalem, and he's promising that his own body will step into the role that the temple once played. The temple was the place where the people of Israel encountered their God, and Jesus is promising that his own body will become that point of contact between heaven and earth.

The Body of Christ

A little bit later this morning, we will be gathering around the communion table and remembering the ancient words of Jesus as we break the bread: *"This is my body, given for you."* It is in our participation as a community in this meal, that we are able to find that same encounter with God that the people of Israel experienced in the temple.

So, this odd saying of Jesus that Mark had such a problem with that he insisted Jesus never said it, is suddenly laden with meaning for us as followers of Jesus.

But there is one more very surprising aspect to this objectionable saying of Jesus. The gospel writer tells us what Jesus meant by it, but he also admits that nobody understood that when Jesus said it. He writes, **"After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken."**

Nobody Understood Jesus

So, the Jewish officials don't understand what Jesus means, and neither do the disciples, not when he says it. In fact, they have to remember what he said for the three years of ministry that, according to the Gospel of John, are still ahead of Jesus at this point. They have to remember it until after he is crucified and then raised from the dead, and only then, only after the resurrection, will this saying of Jesus mean anything to them. So, what did they think that Jesus meant in the meantime? Did they think for three years that Jesus was making a terrorist threat against the temple? I mean, what else could they have thought?

The Resurrection Changed Everything

But this actually underlines something that is absolutely central to the whole Christian faith. It all comes down to the experience of Jesus' death and resurrection. Very clearly, once those first Christians became convinced that Jesus really had risen from the dead, they went over everything that they remembered him saying and doing and all of it took on new meaning.

Previously vague statements about his relationship with his heavenly Father suddenly become indications that he was God's Son in some unique way. Parables that were once incomprehensible became clearly about him and who he truly was. Nonsensical sayings became profound truths. Everything changed as it was seen through that lens.

How John is Telling his Story

And since the Gospel of John presents this story at the very beginning of his Gospel instead of at the end like the other three, the author is loudly announcing to us that he intends to tell this whole story through that lens. He is not merely going to tell us what Jesus did and said; he is going to tell us what his words and deeds meant in the light of his death and resurrection. And that probably explains why Jesus speaks so differently in this gospel as compared to the others. The writer isn't just telling us what Jesus said; he is translating it all into the deeper meaning as he goes.

But, if that was true for the gospel writer, how much truer is it for us today? One of the things that unites us as Christians is our admiration for this man, Jesus. We admire his wisdom, his teaching, his care for the sinners and outcasts and the healing he brought into people's lives. I would hope that all of those things inspire us as we do our best to walk in the path that Jesus has shown to us.

The Power of the Resurrection

But it is the experience of the resurrection of Jesus and its power that gives us the ability to keep going. It is the knowledge of that that transforms this simple meal that we will share into a spiritual feast of divine proportions. It is what gives us the hope and expectation that death is not the final word despite the fact that it often seems to reign in this world.

But I want you to note how I am phrasing this. It is about the *experience* of the resurrection of Jesus. I know there are some who would tell you that it is enough that we hear the news that Jesus is risen from the dead – that we accept the testimony of those first-generation Christians who saw him after his death. But I honestly don't think that that is what it is about. It is not just a matter of coming to accept the intellectual knowledge that people saw Jesus alive. It's not just about believing that it happened.

Firsthand Experience

The thing that changed everything for those early believers was when they experienced that resurrection for themselves. And, yes, some of them had a very direct experience of the risen Jesus, but not all did. But those who did not see him directly, didn't just have to take other people's word for it. They could experience the power of the resurrection for themselves.

They experienced it in the community of the church that came together and supported one another in the face of danger and opposition. They experienced it when they stepped out in faith to bring healing and hope to the people of their community. And they experienced it when they took on the structures of oppression in their society, much like Jesus attacked the temple institution in his day, and they survived. They experienced it when they gathered to share a common meal. And they especially experienced it when they saw new life coming out of death in many areas of their lives.

And so We Gather for Communion

In a little while, we will enter into a celebration of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. And so, I will invite you to come to this celebration with an expectation. Don't expect to merely hear a testimony to what happened to Jesus. Expect to enter into the experience of his death and resurrection for yourself. For the church community dies and is raised up to new life together every time we do this. And I would invite you to filter everything you have learned about Jesus through this experience.