

I have a friend who is an atheist and I like him because he's honest and knows he won't hurt my feelings if he tells me what he really thinks. And one of the things he said was that he sees "a great divide between Jesus and Paul." And I've heard this criticism of Christianity before – it shows up in the comments sections online a lot – careful going in to those waters. It states that what we call Christianity, some, not my friend, would mockingly refer to as Paulianity.

It supposes that "Jesus was," note the tense, "a moral teacher, who gave challenging and radical law and morality to the people and then Paul came along later and that's where we get all the mythical, religious stuff about heaven and hell, and eternal life."

I think this assertion falls short for two reasons, biased admittedly as I am. First, because Paul is linked to Jesus' ministry quite closely. If someone wanted to "toss Paul out" not just for this reason, but perhaps because his teaching on marriage or sexuality is offensive or something... well, you then have to toss out the book of Acts. The second half of that book is all about God working through Paul's missionary journeys. And he was there in the first half today, mentioned as Saul. And if you throw out Acts, you need to throw out the testimony of the Apostles who vetted Paul – not to mention Peter, who talks about Paul in his Epistles... And if you throw out Acts, you need to throw out Luke because Luke wrote both of those books and if he is "influenced by Paul" he can't be trusted either!

Instead, we might see that from Jesus, not only appearing to Paul on the Road to Damascus – even if we toss that out, Paul is still directly linked and active in Ministry with the other Apostles who sat at the feet of Jesus, who could have corrected his "false, made up teaching" if that was the case – especially since John lived longer than Paul and could have set it straight, but instead John, like Paul, proclaims life eternal in Jesus in his letters and Gospel and vision of Revelation.

Paul is linked to Jesus.

Secondly, I don't think we are unwitting members of "paulianity," because when we look at the words of Jesus, do we see stern, radical, morality and law in the Sermon on the Mount? Yes, but do we not also see in that same sermon, wonderful promises of eternal life in the beatitudes? The mourning WILL be comforted, the meek will inherit the earth, the poor will have the kingdom of heaven. And so on.

And what about the rest of his teaching: Is eternal life there? All over!

So how can he be JUST a moral teacher?

Now some "real smart people" will say "all the heaven and hell stuff that Jesus teaches had been added later and was not in the 'real original' Gospel text that all the Gospel writers built off of – the Q text!"

The problem with that? We have no, zero, nada, zilch, no evidence that a Q text ever existed! It's never been found, never referenced anywhere, and yet the text critics say they are "just following the evidence!"

The evidence is that the Gospel writers recorded eyewitness testimony of Jesus' ministry, his death, and his resurrection. And in his ministry, what does our Lord say?

Did Jesus claim to be the door of the sheepfold leading to eternal life, like last week in John 10?

Did he say John 3:16 where whoever believes in the Son will not perish but have eternal life?

John 11, I am the Resurrection and the Life, he who believes in me, even though they die, yet shall they live! That's not Paul, that's John, or rather, John recording Jesus himself.

But make no mistake it's in Luke as well, where he promises a criminal that he will be with him, that day, in paradise.

And Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record how he rebuked the sadducees who tried to make the resurrection absurd – “how can one live forever? Who's wife will that person be?” And he tells them --recorded in each gospel-- that God is the God of the Living, not the dead.

Were Moses and Elijah on the mount of transfiguration, as – not Paul – claimed, but Peter and John who were there? Yes.

Did he not teach this today?

“In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself that where I am you may be also.”

Our lectionary authors did a great job picking readings in the Easter season, early on we heard of the resurrection accounts, but the last 2 weeks have been Jesus, not Paul, teaching and promising eternal life. And if he rose again as we have talked through already this easter season, then this is real.

Then there really is a place for us, or a thief on a cross, or St. Stephen, or Moses or Elijah, to BE. To live.

How and what that looks like as our bodies are in tombs, or graves, or ash? That's a bit hard to say precisely – even the disciples are struggling with this. Thomas says, “Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

Jesus says, “No, Thomas, You do know where I am going and the Way to get there.”

And we might raise an eyebrow, “Jesus, are you sure?” And so he answers for us, where is he going? verse 12: “I am going to the Father.” And how do we get there? Verse 6: “I, Jesus, am the way.”

Which is helpful because Thomas is right in the sense that we don’t know where the Father is: other than everywhere, and in promised places for the Good of His people, but as to his Throne Room? What plane or reality is that? Surely it is beyond all time and space. And Thomas is right in that we have no mechanism for measuring this or getting there. What spaceship will bring us there? It isn’t just beyond mars or some kolob – I am sorry to say it, but it’s true.

Which again might cause us to think maybe this can’t be real, or it’s made up - a fanciful invention by Constantine, or Paul, or the disciples – except for the fact that we DO know there is SOMETHING beyond space and time, since space and time exist at all. And the dates don’t add up on the documents for this to be made up by Constantine or Paul or some disciple while the others were alive to refute it...

Which leaves us with a Risen Lord Jesus, and His Word that *actually* teaches this: eternal life, in heaven – and in the resurrection. And Jesus does teach a resurrection, by the way, John 6:39-40  
And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

And I think Jesus knows this is all hard to wrap our heads around which is why here in the text he implores us to trust him, “If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” If there wasn’t a place for us, he wouldn’t have told us there is. But he, the real, historical, Risen, Jesus has told us there is a place for us – is he strong enough to see us there?

No space-ship needed, no, he will take us there himself he promises. Can we trust he knows the way? No stopping to ask for directions, no GPS needed, we have a chauffeur, he knows the way, even if it is through a valley of death, sit back, enjoy the ride, he will see you there.

Even as Isaiah in Isaiah 6 is brought to the Father, even as in Revelation the Saints are coming out of the great tribulation and are before the Throne with robes washed in the blood of the lamb, waving palm branches, waiting for the final victory feast.

This is our God of the living. He has died to wash us clean, he has risen, victorious over all things, he ascends to the right hand of the Father to intercede for us, and to take us to himself there in the Father's house. He is the rightful Son, he can bring anyone he wants there.

And it just so happens: he wants you there. Just as he promised it to sinful disciples, so to us: a place for us. All claimed by him in the Word and Wet Word of baptism and the supper, these are his promises that he wants you there, and he will see you safely there.

And what might be there? Waters of life, trees with healing in season, rest, peace, reunions with some loved ones, white robes and a palm branch for the party before the King. Not made up. Real.

That's Good news in a world of death and brokenness – our God is the God of the living. And that is not a new innovation, it is from over 66 books, dozens of authors, thousands of years, from Job proclaiming a redeemer, to Moses pointing to a Messiah, to the Prophets, to the greatest Prophet, Priest and King, Christ our Risen Lord. He taught it, and he is risen just as he said, so we can trust it. He will be forever praised. Amen.