Good evening, everyone. It is a pleasure being here and doing so is a great privilege, so thank you for your time. And what a privilege it is to see you all here. For those who don’t know me my name is Morgan and I am a senior studying Psychology and Philosophy, as well as am on the Torch bible study team and faith formation team here at Newman. I want to say right off the bat that apologetics does not have to be daunting, and hopefully tonight you can gain something from this talk and use it to defend the faith we hold dear, or even share with a friend or colleague who wants to know more about Christianity. If you have any notebooks or journals to write down what you hear tonight I want to strongly encourage you to take notes as we move through the evening.

I want to begin with a quote from a more contemporary scholar and defender of the faith, John Lennox. Quote "Indeed, faith is a response to evidence, not a rejoicing in the absence of evidence.” End quote. As Oxford mathematician and theologian John Lennox insightfully notes, our faith in Jesus Christ is grounded in the compelling evidence supporting it, rather than relying on mere blind belief. That being said, I have a question for all of you: Why are you Christian? What is the basis for your belief in Jesus Christ? Set aside personal experience for a moment. Can you make a persuasive case for Christianity? If I were an atheist, approaching you in a public space—be it the street, the workplace, or the classroom—and asked you why you hold these convictions, what would your response be? Moreover, if you were engaging in civil discourse with our Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist friends, what would you say to demonstrate the truth of Christianity? As Christians, the burden of proof falls on us to provide a coherent and thoughtful defense of the resurrection, which frankly ladies and gentlemen remains the central question of our time. We bear a moral obligation not only to safeguard our own faith but to guide others toward the truth. Thus, how can we, with clarity and conviction, explain to others why Christianity is indeed true?

Of course we can approach the issue through personal experience and the faith we have in Christ but unfortunately, if I am an atheist that doesn’t mean much to me, I want evidence, data, something tangible. Tonight I am going to take a rather unconventional approach to apologetics and play devil’s advocate, offering atheist objections primarily, and Christian rebuttals following. For example I’ll postulate, “Surely you don’t believe in Christianity, the Bible contains x y z, or Christianity is false because of x y z” to which I will give an answer, with evidence, to refute the questioner. Doing so, my hope is that you may be prepared for these tough questions in the future, so we can educate and guide others with love, compassion, and a willingness to listen.

Now when I make the claim that Christianity is true, in philosophy we call this a “truth claim”. I make a truth claim about an apple when I say, “this apple is red.”, and if the apple happens to be red, I have ample evidence to back up my claim therefore making it true. The validity and reliability of truth claims are contingent on the evidence that is provided for such. If I belong to the Islamic faith and profess “Mohammed was Allah’s final prophet, and the Quran is Allah’s final say,” I should have the evidence to back up that claim. If I belong to the Mormon faith and assert “Joseph Smith was a prophet of god and restored his church”, I must provide ample evidence for that as well. Otherwise, we end up with blind faith, the kind that starts wars, perpetuates violence, and sews division.

Now, C.S. Lewis, celebrated author, apologist, and theologian offers the famous trilemma for Christianity: either Jesus Christ was a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. In his book Mere Christianity, he popularized this conundrum, although he was not the first to propose it. Nevertheless, the trilemma brings up an interesting detail: there was something special about the figure of Jesus Christ. There is something almost mysterious or mythic about him: his wisdom, his compassion, and gentle mastery. Throughout the ages laurels have been thrown to Christ to commend his character and good virtue, like a wise teacher guiding those to the light.

Yet C.S. Lewis says not so fast. A good, sensible, humble person would never claim to be God, and not only that, don’t want you to think they are God. Now Jesus said once you have seen me, you have seen God the Father –and Lewis argues no spiritual guide or humble teacher would make the outrageous claim that they are the author of the universe.

I want to direct your attention now to the trial of Jesus, which prior to his crucifixion, provides a profound insight into the theological and sociopolitical tensions of the time. In a clandestine and secretive assembly, the high priests interrogate Jesus. Caiaphas, the high priest and chief interrogator, directly confronts Jesus with a pivotal question: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One, or the Son of God?" (The term "Messiah," or *Mashiach* in Aramaic, literally translates to "the Anointed One.") In response, Jesus makes two extraordinary declarations. First, he asserts "I AM," a direct reference to the divine name revealed to Moses in the Book of Exodus, "I AM WHO I AM." Second, he alludes to the prophetic vision in the Book of Daniel, stating that the "Son of Man" will be seen coming on the clouds of heaven, seated at the right hand of God’s power. Through these pronouncements, Jesus unequivocally identifies himself with the divine, an assertion that stands in stark contrast to the beliefs held by the Pharisees, who vehemently denied his divinity. This raises a compelling question: What, then, would a first-century Jew have to gain from publicly claiming to be God?

**Now this brings us to our first objection: Jesus Christ was a liar and or a lunatic. It was all made up.**

* To which we can respond: Firstly, liars usually crack under pressure. Their story changes. They leave out details and add in details. The case of Christ is unique and unusual because his story remained steadfast and he never faltered to both religious and political leaders, all the way to his death. Secondly, typically good liars have a sufficient motive for their stories. Jesus only had negative consequences for his enormous claims. Furthermore, wouldn’t you all agree charlatans, cult leaders, and deceivers typically lie for money, power, or sexual desires? To no one's surprise see in John chapter 6 verse 15, they tried to “make him a king by force” to which he declined, withdrew, and secluded himself. Some liar, right?
* To take this idea a step further we cannot say in good faith that Jesus Christ was a lunatic. We know through the gospels that he displayed a clear sense of purpose, a stable and sound mind, and his words are down to earth and grounded. He displays no signs of paranoia or delusion. If he were a schizophrenic or displayed some sort of schizoid disorder where he believed he were to be God, he would not have displayed the fair and stable emotions like he did. He cried when Lazarus died. He was angry when he saw the temple overrun by merchants and thieves. As he carries the cross he displays a tremendous sense of self control and forgiveness as he is spit on and ridiculed. A lunatic cannot regulate their emotions in this way. Perhaps the most damning piece of evidence in response to this objection though is the relationships Jesus had with the people in his life, and how healthy and substantive they were. We mustn't deny the fact that Jesus interacted with people from all walks of life and backgrounds, such as prostitutes and tax collectors. No Jew in the 1st century would have stuck by the side of another for more than 3 years of public ministry had the other been a delusional lunatic.
* The character of Christ stands on its own merit. No man in history has permeated through the public consciousness like Jesus Christ, and for good reason. Consider this for a moment. I want you to think of any instance where Christ used his message to gain money, power, or fame, or if the disciples did. Now think of an instance where a charlatan or liar has come along using a wicked version of Christ’s teachings to gain worldly pleasures, money, or power. You may have already thought of them, and to remain charitable we need not name any contenders but the principle still stands: Jesus Christ was not a liar, nor was he a lunatic.

**This brings us to our second objection: The gospel accounts are unreliable, and are most likely legend stories or fabrications. We cannot use them as reliable evidence for the resurrection.**

Allow me to draw your attention to the fact that shortly after the death of Christ, within the first 3-5 years after the cross that Christianity unequivocally shot out of a cannon and spread like wildfire. Now we can dismiss this as the byproduct of tedious and relentless action by the disciples to sell an elaborate lie, yet the principle of Occam’s Razor, which asserts that the simplest explanation typically holds the most merit, tells us that probably wasn’t the case. It’s more likely they saw what they believed to be the risen Christ, and therefore spread it across the Mediterranean and into Asia Minor, India, Spain, and so forth. Now notwithstanding the extra-biblical accounts of Jesus' life, such as those provided by the Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus and the political analyst Tacitus, if nothing else, I would like to emphasize this evening that the gospels represent the most significant and reliable sources of evidence regarding the life of Christ. The dating of the gospels, however, is often subject to presuppositions from secular scholars who attempt to undermine their authenticity. “We do not definitively know who authored the gospels,” they claim. A cursory online search reveals a variety of speculative dates, ranging from as late as 140 AD to as early as 40 AD, just seven years after the death of Christ. Therefore, it is imperative that we establish the facts with academic rigor.

* The Gospel of John, most likely written by John, was composed in A.D. 59-65, and as late as 100 AD, though unlikely.
* The Gospel of Luke, friend to Paul, was composed in A.D. 59.
* The Gospel of Matthew, most likely written by Matthew the tax collector, was written in A.D. 65, though some sources say 10-20 years earlier in 40 A.D.
* And the Gospel of Mark, friend to Peter, in A.D. 55

These written accounts, composed approximately 30 years after the resurrection of Christ, are widely accepted by both scholars and historians as being written no later than A.D. 70, just prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Even if these accounts were passed down orally, we can confidently argue that the "oral transmission" objection lacks substantial merit due to the robust and intricate network of early Christians that existed following Christ's death. This network played a crucial role in preserving the gospels, ensuring their accuracy by corroborating eyewitness testimonies.

Dr. David Alan Black, in his book *Why four gospels?* provides us some crucial information on the early state of Christianity. Here are some key insights I want to state in support of this argument.

* Number 1: After Christ’s death, we find in the book of Acts chapter 2 the early church is born with the descending of the Holy Spirit on pentecost. It should also be noted that the church was facing persecution under the Jewish king Herod Agrippa the I, who ruled from A.D. 41-44. Now Rome placed Agrippa on the throne in Jerusalem due to his good standing with Rome, as he was also friends with emperor Tiberius, and future emperors Caligula and Claudius.
* Number 2: The book of Acts chronicles the persecutions of the early church and the apostles under Agrippa the I. He did this in order to appease the Jews and to “keep the peace” in the province of Judea. This is relevant because the early church realized they needed a written account of Christ’s life as they were being scattered from Agrippa. Matthew, a personal apostle of Christ, was tasked with this, thus producing the gospel according to Matthew. Early Christian persecutions prompted the Marcan gospel to be produced as well, so scholars will typically place either Mark or Matthew first.
* Number 3: Naturally, each gospel succeeded within the first 30 years of the early church. For example, Paul, formally Saul who persecuted and killed Christians himself, helped Luke produce his gospel in A.D. 59. Furthermore, while being detained in Rome in A.D. 60-62, Paul asked Peter to authorize and legitimize Luke’s gospel, and we know Peter was the bishop of Rome during that time, facing persecution under the emperor, you guessed it, Nero.

When we look at the historical context, the pieces start to fit together perfectly. Therefore, we have good reason to believe that the early chronicles of Christ’s life were legitimate and accurate because they came straight from the sources, the eyewitness testimony. Furthermore this amazing phenomena we have partly to thank St. Paul for –as his mission trips through Asia Minor, letters to early established churches, and inquisition of eyewitness accounts established the concrete story we know today.

And let’s not dismiss this crucial information. We know that one of the earliest Christian creeds was chronicled by Paul of Tarsus in his letter to the Corinthians, and it’s older than the New Testament itself. If I may, I would like to expand on that point.

After being blinded on the way to Damascus, Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians that he spent time in Arabia, and then returned to Damascus as early as right after the resurrection of Christ to as late as three to five years after the resurrection of Christ, Paul spends time in Jerusalem. It was there where he relentlessly questioned eyewitness accounts of Christ’s resurrection, as his aim was to obtain the facts, rather than contribute to legend. Paul, when chronicling his time in Jerusalem, uses the word (anakrithēis) in Greek, meaning formal inquiry or inquisition. This translation tells us that his questioning can be interpreted as formal interviews, grilling eyewitness accounts in interrogations to obtain the truth. Now not that legend could have been a possibility anyway, as we know that this was as late as three years after the death of Christ, too early to be considered legend. So what do we get? The first creed of early Christians documented in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 15:3–5. It states as follows:

“*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.”*

So one might make the objection that this early creed is inaccurate or incomplete. It doesn’t fully encompass the story of Jesus. Well it isn’t supposed to. 98% of Christ’s followers were illiterate during the time he was alive, and this is why he spoke in many parables. The birds dwelt among the trees and the trees are like the kingdom of God. Turn the other cheek. Don’t waste your talents, and so forth. What is important is that within the early church a simple framework was established and circulated amongst the believers, something tangible, cut and dry, and easy to pass onward. Paul henceforth received it and documented it.

To provide a clear framework, let’s start from the crucifixion and work forward.

Number 1. Assuming Christ’s death occurred in 30 A.D. Three days later, he appears to over 500 people as well as the apostles like he said he would.

Number 2. Paul, on the way to Damascus, is blinded and meets the risen Christ, not by the work of a missionary but by the glory of God, as he recounts in Galatians. Three years later in 33 A.D., he meets with Peter and James in Jerusalem to get acquainted with them and interrogate them about what they saw. Now remember, this meeting most likely didn’t consist of shooting the breeze. Paul probably went “I saw the risen Christ, you saw the risen Christ, describe to me everything you’ve seen and experienced, did we see the same thing”. It is also in Jerusalem where Paul interviews eyewitness accounts, and where he acquires the first Christian creed amongst interconnected communities of early Christians.

Number 3. By A.D. 40, under the reign of Agrippa I, Christian persecution intensified, prompting the composition of Matthew’s gospel. Mark, Luke, and John followed, respectively. By A.D. 60 at the earliest, and no later than A.D. 100, we have the canonical gospel story and early copies of the gospels in circulation throughout the Mediterranean and Asia Minor. And there you have the gospel story.

I want to make this important point. Indeed, in the ancient world, the reliability of a story was and is predicated upon the eyewitness testimony and record keeping. We know a great wealth of Alexander the Great –his campaigns, his military, the territory he acquired for Macedonia, how he was tutored by Aristotle. Alexander the Great died in 323 BC, and Arrian of Nicomedia (AD 130) was a historian who is considered the gold standard for the biography of Alexander the Great, yet it wouldn’t be for 400 years after Alexander the Great’s death would Arrian write of his military campaigns, which historians and scholars accept as historical fact. So if we are skeptical of Jesus’ life which was written within periods up to 60 years after his death, then let’s hold some academic integrity and be even more skeptical of other historical figures such as Alexander the Great. But we can’t do that, doing so would effectively plunge us into academic ignorance or a Dark Ages of sorts when interpreting history. The only reason some scholars question the gospels is due to their presuppositions regarding the nature of Christ. To maintain consistency and fairness in our historical analysis, we must evaluate all sources with the same critical approach. So let’s be fair here and be academically consistent across the board.

**Our third objection is rather unconventional and focuses on the details of the gospels. Someone may ask it as such: How do we know for certain that the resurrection occurred? That just seems so unrealistic. No one can rise from the dead.**

To which we can answer as such:

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as quote

“Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more.” end quote

Why does this matter? Trauma is a type of IMPACT EVENT, which in psychology can be defined as an event that has a substantial psychological impact on an individual, causing noticeable changes in their emotions, behaviors, and thinking patterns. It can be positive or negative, and an impact event is the kind of event you will remember your whole life. For some folks, think of where you were when the second plane hit the second tower on September 11th. Or perhaps what you were doing when you found out the stock market crashed in 2008. Perhaps your first car. Your first kiss. The name of your first dog. Your wedding day. We remember these things for a lifetime because they impacted us substantially, a phenomenon that is hypercomplex and crucial to understanding the validity of the gospels.

This past semester I worked in a human memory lab where I was tasked with coding and transcribing audio files of older men and women and the recounting of their lives. Some of these people grew up in the 1950s, describing events from their childhood with incredible and astonishing detail, more than 70 years ago. Now think of the gospels. I would argue it is frankly ignorant and absurd to dismiss the gospels as inaccurate tellings of the apostles' lives with Christ. Even if we accept that the gospels were written as late as A.D. 60-100, we can still reason the authors recounted the events with accuracy because of the very nature of Christ’s resurrection, which in of itself is an impact event. Atheistic historians, Christian historians, scholars and philosophers within academia alike have now accepted this universal proposition: whatever the author’s saw and experienced in A.D. 33 and shortly afterwards was otherworldly, impactful, and enough to prompt them to write with extreme detail. That is to say, the disciples genuinely believed they touched, ate with, saw, and experienced the risen Christ. Let us not dismiss this historical fact.

Another phenomenon we mustn’t dismiss is the embarrassing details of the gospels. And I love this explanation because not only does it truly expose how committed to truth the gospels are, it does so in a simplistic manner. If I wanted to commit a massive undertaking such as fraud, I’m going to ensure I look as good as possible when writing the gospel, depicting myself and others in the most flattering light. But this isn’t the case. Pay mind to the different ways within the gospel accounts the story is depicted. Jesus calls Peter Satan after Peter attempts to stop Jesus’ destiny with the cross. Jesus’ family thinks he is out of his mind and leaves him along with a large chunk of his followers. The disciples scattered through fear on the Mount of Olives. Peter denies Christ three times, and perhaps the most damning piece of evidence, the empty tomb narrative.

Allow me to elaborate. To all the women here tonight I want to apologise beforehand, yet in the context of first-century Palestine, a deeply patriarchal society, the testimony of women was considered significantly less reliable than that of men. Women’s testimony was often deemed inadmissible in court, their voices dismissed in legal matters, and even in personal affairs like divorce, a man’s word held far more weight than a woman’s. This was the multifaceted combination of Jewish law and Roman governance. Given this social structure, one might pause to ask: Why, then, would the Gospels include the detail that a woman was the first to discover the empty tomb? If the Gospel accounts were fabrications or attempts to promote a false narrative, it seems highly unlikely that the writers would have chosen to present this detail. In a society where male testimony was privileged, the most logical approach to constructing a persuasive, authoritative account would have been to have a man, preferably a prominent disciple, discover the tomb first. This would lend credibility to the story and align with the cultural norms of the time.

Ladies and gentlemen, the inclusion of a woman as the first witness to the resurrection suggests that the Gospel writers were not concerned with crafting a culturally acceptable narrative. Rather, this detail stands as evidence of the authenticity of the account. If the story were fabricated, one would expect the writers to avoid including an element that would likely undermine the perceived reliability of the testimony. The fact that the Gospels contain this seemingly "embarrassing" detail only reinforces the likelihood that the account is rooted in historical truth—because it is a detail that would have been difficult to invent, and would have been seen as less credible in the cultural context of the time.

Let us turn our attention back to St. Paul. Prior to his encounter with Peter and other eyewitnesses in Jerusalem, it is well-documented that Paul was a fervent persecutor of Christians, responsible for the imprisonment and execution of numerous followers of the early church, and sought to eradicate the movement altogether. The significance of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus lies in the stark transformation that occurred in a remarkably brief period. Within days, Paul transitioned from viewing Jesus as a false prophet to professing him as the Son of God. This shift is analogous to imagining a figure such as Christopher Hitchens, a prominent 21st-century atheist who, shortly before his death, famously declared that "God is not good and religion poisons everything," suddenly proclaiming, "I have seen the risen Christ, and God is real." Or perhaps another prominent atheist, Richard Dawkins, who throughout his whole academic career of professing the illegitimacy of God, suddenly was to say “I was wrong. God is real, I concede everything I have said.”

The conversion of Paul of Tarsus was not only radical, but also transformative and dramatic, unfolding in a remarkably short span of time. This phenomenon presents a significant challenge for those who would deny the resurrection, as they must account for the veracity of his experience. It is implausible to suggest that Paul's experience was the result of a hallucination driven by trauma or grief, as he had no apparent psychological or emotional loss to prompt such. Furthermore, in his epistles, Paul clearly asserts that no missionary or external influence contributed to his conversion. As a Pharisee deeply invested in Jewish law, he had much to lose from embracing Christianity. Therefore, the dramatic nature of his conversion remains difficult to explain unless one accepts the possibility that he genuinely encountered the risen Christ. Can we accept these terms for the resurrection story? I say we can, and we can with confidence.

**This brings us to our last and final objection of the evening, something deeper and more personal I would like to close out with. It goes as such: What does Christianity have to offer me that other religions don’t? What is so special about it? And if Christianity is true, why does evil exist?**

My response to this objection is four-fold.

Number 1. It is salient to understand that within the human condition exists questions of great importance, such as why am I here, what is my purpose, what is my place within the universe and on this earth? These questions have plagued the minds of humanity for millennia –and for good reason. Various spiritual movements, religions, philosophies, and ethical codes have been born throughout history to cultivate moral character yet none quite provide the comprehensiveness and holistic nature of reality like Christianity does. While philosophers, great thinkers, and scholars throughout history have grappled and struggled to answer these questions, Christianity offers a coherent and timeless answer: that we are created in the image of God, and our purpose is to know, love, and serve him while placing our faith in his son. To those burdened by guilt and shame, they find redemption and freedom when coming to Christ. Undeniably, as asserted before, no figure in history has been as influential or crucial to the human story as Christ Jesus. His mythical and almost eclectic influence has permeated through history over and over again, and his character rests upon its own merit. Within the subfield of Christology we can be confident that the nature of Christ is mysterious, that of a gentle master, a moral teacher of a calibur unlike no other. And so you may encounter grievances such as why should I love a god who created me wicked, sick, predisposed towards hurting my neighbor?

And I would argue that let us not forget that we are the determinants of our own lives. We have a choice. Let’s say that god doesn’t exist, who is still responsible for the evil that occurs on earth? A true and genuine relationship, whether it be romantic or platonic, is predicated upon choice. Ergo the love that God has for us would not be authentic had he created us without free will. If I force a woman to love me, and she has no other choice, that isn’t true, authentic love –it’s manipulation. Freedom is valuable, and freedom is inexpugnable from the human person.

Number 2. Evil exists not because God created it, it is merely the absence or deprivation of good. God did not create evil, he does not beget evil like he begets good. We suffer in this world because we chose to disobey God in our free will. Yet Christianity is the only religion where God manifests himself in the flesh, inserts himself into our world, fully God and fully man. To spare you all of the theological jargon I won’t get too into it, yet the essential idea is that through the person of Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago, he partakes in our suffering, understands our grievances, and takes up his cross in agonizing pain to die for humanity. Only through Christianity can we reconcile why suffering exists, we have a God who overcame it. Through Christ’s resurrection we can be confident that death is not the end and that there is hope.

Number 3. Pascal’s Wager. Now I waited until the end of my talk to use this because, frankly, it is one the weakest of arguments for the existence of God and proving why Christianity is true, but it is still applicable nevertheless and is worth mentioning. Blaise Pascal was a 17th century philosopher who aimed to show that we *ought to believe in God,* rather than prove God’s existence outright. Therefore his reasons are prudential rather than evidence-based. Nevertheless, his wager goes as such: Say I live a good Christian life. I love others, forgive, give to the poor, evangelize. But God doesn’t exist. I have nothing to lose, I lived a good life. If he does exist, I have eternal happiness with him. If I am an atheist and God exists, I have everything to lose and risk eternal damnation. Ergo I’m wagering eternity after I die. Pascal argues wouldn’t you rather accept the terms of being a believer?

Number 4. Lastly, and finally, observe the deaths of the apostles. No-one dies for a lie. People have died for what they thought to be true, such as zealous bombers and terrorists, but never for a lie in specific. Each disciple went to their graves professing Christ as Lord and never went back on their word. This odd detail makes Christianity especially unique.

I want to end my talk by beseeching you to observe the evidence, think critically, and take whatever you’ve learned tonight and share it with others. Tonight we have explored the evidence for the gospels, the early church, the nature of Christ, and what Christianity offers to us. But beyond the historical facts and evidence Christianity offers you a choice, it offers you hope, freedom, and a loving relationship with your creator. You see the crux of the argument for Christianity doesn’t just lie in understanding the facts, it lies in accepting Christ in your heart and sharing that fervence with others. I want to invite you all to experience the living breathing truth that Christianity offers us. Pope John Paul the II puts it beautifully, saying

"We must defend the truth at all costs, even if we are reduced to just twelve again”.

Thank you, God bless you, and please stay after for questions. Goodnight.

1. Bart Erhman’s perspective on gospels

* 2 to establish historical fact, Jesus has 11 Erhman says

1. Crucifixion –you were dead, unequivocally. All historians agree on this. Once he was dead he was dead.