

April 12, 2009

CHRIST IS RISEN!

Matthew 28

A Sunday School teacher was attempting to teach her young students the true meaning of Easter. "Why do we celebrate Easter?" she asked. When the children replied 'because of the Easter bunny, Easter eggs, candy, spring, etc., she said, "No, those are Easter traditions and symbols, but what is the REASON why we celebrate Easter? One little girl raised her hand and said, "Easter celebrates Jesus coming out of the tomb." "Yes!" said the teacher, excited and relieved that finally the correct answer had surfaced. Encouraged, she prompted, "Jesus arose from the tomb, and why is that important for us?" Without hesitating, the little girl replied, "He looks to see if he can see his shadow, and if He can, he goes back in for another six weeks!"

Unfortunately, for many, Easter is not about the risen Christ – but the Easter Bunny, and Easter baskets and Easter bonnets, with a lot of colored eggs and chocolate thrown in. Many people who would otherwise not darken the doors of the church choose this Sunday to dress up in their best and go. For some it is the insistence of their wife or husband, for some it is at the invitation of a friend, still others a sense of pious obligation drives them to church. But this morning, I want to tell you who are here, that you have come in response to our prayers. We have prayed long and hard for many of you to be here this morning and God has used many means for you to be here. In fact, I would be so bold as to say that you wouldn't be here unless someone had been praying for you.

Because there is good news for you this morning – **Christ is risen!** That is the heart of the gospel – Christ is risen! If He had not risen – we would be fools to be here. The real, actual resurrection of Christ from the dead is the central fact of the gospel. I am anticipating and expecting at least two things to happen this morning: **one is that for those who already believe in Christ, your faith would be strengthened;** and the second is that **for those who do not yet believe in Christ, faith would be awakened in your hearts to believe and receive Christ for salvation.**

The Bible teaches and Christians universally agree that the resurrection of Jesus is central to their faith. Popular apologist Josh McDowell wrote, **"The resurrection of Jesus Christ and Christianity stand or fall together"** Terry Miethe, a Christian professor of philosophy at Oxford, has maintained that the question, **"Did Jesus rise from the dead?" is the most important question regarding the claims of the Christian faith".** You cannot call yourself a Christian unless you believe that God raised Jesus from the dead.

For Paul, the earliest of the New Testament writers, the resurrection was central to his message: *'if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith also is vain...for if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.'* 1 Corinthians 15:13-17

Everything in our Christian faith centers on the literal, bodily, resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And this morning I want to do three things: first, I want to give you **good, solid evidence of His resurrection;** second, I want to give you **reasons why the resurrection of Jesus is so vital to believers and non-believers alike;** and finally, to **spell out some of the implications of the resurrection** for you.

RESURRECTION: Fact or Fiction?

Most people have no trouble believing that such a person as Jesus of Nazareth existed historically in time and space. The factual evidence, both secular and sacred is overwhelming. Many will even go so far as to acclaim Him as a great teacher and moral example. He is acceptable if we just leave Him as a sort of benign influence, a guru of tolerance and peace, one teacher of truth among many. But when it comes to the resurrection – most will not accept it. **That would mean Jesus is who He says He is – and suddenly they are face to face with THE TRUTH.**

Ever since Christ rose from the dead, men have tried to suppress the truth, cover the truth, pervert the truth, and otherwise discredit the resurrection. But no matter how hard they have tried to relegate it to myth, legend or lie, the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ remains the central incontrovertible, unchangeable, and life-transforming fact of the Christian faith.

*In the early 1930's the Communist leader Bukharin journeyed from Moscow to Kiev. His mission was to address a huge assembly, and his subject was "atheism." For a solid hour he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity, hurling argument after argument heaped on top of ridicule. At last he was finished and viewed what he thought was the smoldering ashes of mens' ruined faith. "Are there any questions?" Bukharin demanded. A single man rose and asked permission to speak. He mounted the platform and moved close to Bukharin. The audience was breathlessly silent as the man surveyed the huge crowd. At last he shouted the ancient Orthodox greeting, "**CHRIST IS RISEN!**" The vast assembly arose as one man and the response came crashing like the sounds of an avalanche, "**HE IS RISEN INDEED!**"*

There are three, rock-solid proofs we will look at, that will work to strengthen the faith of you who believe, and awaken faith in you who do not: **the evidence of the empty tomb; the evidence of the eyewitnesses; the evidence of changed lives.**

THE EVIDENCE OF THE EMPTY TOMB

Both Jewish and Roman historic sources testify to an empty tomb, as does the Bible. Matthew 28:12-13 specifically states that the **chief priests invented the story that the disciples stole the body.** There would be no need for this fabrication if the tomb had not been empty. Opponents of the Resurrection must account for this. If the tomb had not been empty, the **preaching of the Apostles would not have lasted one day.** All the Jewish authorities needed to do to put an end to Christianity was to produce the body of Jesus. ***That the tomb WAS empty, has never been in serious dispute from any scholar, secular or Biblical.*** But from the moment the tomb was discovered to be empty – attempts to cover it up by those who opposed Christ began to be invented. Let's look at the five most popular inventions.

The Wrong Tomb Theory:

Proponents of this theory claim that the women who visited the grave early in the morning were distraught and emotionally unstable and in their confusion, went to the wrong tomb. But you would have to accuse the men of the same emotional mistake because they ran to the same tomb after hearing what the women said.

Second, the tomb site was known not only by the followers of Christ but also by their opponents. The Gospels make it clear the body was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council. If the body still remained in the tomb while the Apostles began preaching, the authorities simply would have to go to the right tomb, produce the body, and march it down the streets. This would have ended the Christian faith once and for all. Remember, the preaching of the Resurrection began in Jerusalem, fifteen minutes away from the crucifixion site and the tomb.

The Hallucination Theory:

This theory holds that the resurrection occurred only in the minds of the disciples. Although this theory has persisted down through the centuries, you have to ask yourself, 'Why?' First of all, over 500 people would have had the same hallucination, at different times over a period of 40 days – which according to psychiatrists and other medical professionals, is simply impossible. And again, if the Apostles dreamed up the Resurrection, all the authorities needed to do, was produce the body and that would have ended their hallucination.

The Sleeping Soldiers Theory:

First, if the soldiers were sleeping, how did they know it was the disciples who stole the body? Second, it seems physically impossible for the disciples to sneak past the soldiers and then move a two-ton stone up an incline in absolute silence. Certainly the guards would have heard something. Third, the tomb was secured with a Roman seal. Anyone who moved the stone would break the seal, an offense punishable by death. The depression and cowardice of the disciples makes it difficult to believe that they would suddenly become so brave as to face a detachment of soldiers, steal the body, and then lie about the Resurrection when they would ultimately face a life of suffering and death for their contrived message. Fourth, Roman guards were not likely to fall asleep with such an important duty. There were penalties for doing so – like death! The disciples would have needed to overpower them. Finally, in the Gospel of John the grave clothes were found *"lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself separate from the linen"* (20:6-7).

There was not enough time for the disciples to **sneak past the guards, roll away the stone, unwrap the body, rewrap it in their wrappings, and fold the head piece neatly next to the linen.** In a robbery, the men would have flung the garments down in disorder and fled in fear of detection.

The Swoon Theory:

This is probably my favorite. This one says that Jesus never died on the cross but merely passed out and was mistakenly considered dead. After three days He revived, exited the tomb, and appeared to His disciples who believed He had risen from the dead. **One lady wrote in to a Bible question and answer forum with this very question. 'Our preacher said on Easter, that Jesus just swooned on the cross and that the disciples nursed Him back to health. What do you think? 'Beat your preacher bloody, with a whip tipped with flesh-tearing metal, nail him to a cross; hang him in the sun for 6 hours; run a spear thru his side...put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours and see what happens.'**

The Stolen Body Theory:

This is the theory that began immediately after the resurrection and Matthew thought it was so good he included it in his account. *12 And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, 13 and said, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.'* You honestly have to wonder if Matthew was having a little fun with the detractors of the resurrection. I think also that he was making a point – there will always be those who will refuse to believe and invent stories to cover their lies.

To steal the body, His disciples would have had to take care of the Roman soldiers, who were most certainly not sleeping, and then get rid of it – because the resurrection of Jesus was the central pillar of the gospel, the good news. Think about it, how are these guys going to convince anyone of the resurrection if they knew it was a lie? And why would they perpetuate a lie that only got them hunted down and tortured, maimed and killed? There was very little money in it, and a very short future. All of these theories only point out the lengths people will go to avoid the staggering implications of the resurrected Christ. And then there is the evidence of the eyewitnesses.

THE EVIDENCE OF THE EYEWITNESSES

The risen Christ appeared to many people over a period of 40 days – at one point to over 500 at one time. That's a lot of witnesses to the resurrection. Paul lays it out in 1 Corinthians: *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me.* 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

Lee Strobel, prominent Christian speaker and author, put it like this... **"If we were holding a trial to determine the facts concerning the resurrection, and if we were to call to the witness stand every witness who personally encountered the resurrected Jesus and we cross-examined them for only 15 minutes, and if we went around the clock without a break...we would be listening to first-hand testimony for more than 128 hours...that's over 5 days worth of testimony...who could possibly walk away unconvinced?"** The fact is, too many people, in too many places saw and interacted with the risen Christ for this to be covered up successfully.

THE EVIDENCE OF CHANGED LIVES

I think, however, that the strongest evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, is the evidence of changed lives. That is, the fact of His resurrection will change the way you think, the way you act the way you live. **While men will give their lives for something they believe to be true, they will never give their lives for something they know is a lie.**

When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethemene, the gospel of Mark records that all the disciples left Him and fled – in fact one young man we presume is Mark the writer, was in such a hurry to leave the scene that he left the sheet he was wearing behind and ran naked out of the garden.

During Jesus' trials, none of the disciples stood up for Him, in fact Peter, who was sneaking around, trying to get a fix on what was happening, was confronted by a little serving girl and denied with swearing, that he even knew the guy. Only one of the disciples made it to the crucifixion, and they only went to the tomb because the women had been there first. For the most part, they stayed locked up inside, for fear of their lives. **But something happened.** Something happened to that small band of frightened and humiliated men. . . Less than two months later — they were in Jerusalem, the city that killed Jesus, boldly preaching, even under the threat of death, that — **JESUS CHRIST WAS ALIVE!**

Listen to Peter in Acts 2: *"Men of Israel, listen to these words. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know — this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to the cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death... This Jesus God raised up again to which we are all witnesses."* **What transformed these fearful and confused men into fierce, bold lions was the indisputable evidence of the resurrection!** They saw Him! They talked to Him! They walked with Him! They ate with Him! So all the evidence points to the real, actual bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ — so why is that important?

THE RESURRECTION: *Why is it Important?*

It is important because His resurrection shows that His sacrifice for our sins was approved by God.

'And when they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from a cross and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead... Therefore, let it be known to you brethren, that through Him, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.' Acts 13:29,30, 38 Sin is the issue that separates us from God — and at the heart of sin is our self-will, insisting on our own way, doing things like we want to do them, without regard for God. And Jesus died on the cross, and lay in the tomb three days, and rose again so that our suicidal, self-destructive, impulses would be forever broken and He could bring us to God.

It is important because His resurrection gives us firm assurance that we will one day rise again.

'Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power.' 1 Corinthians 6:14 And it fills us with great hope and anticipation that we will one day see all those who have gone before in Christ, especially our family and friends. *'But we do not want you to be uniformed brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus... For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord.'* 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17

It is important because His resurrection means that future judgment is certain.

'Because [God] has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man who He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.' Acts 17:31 He will one day call to judgment the bodies of all who are in the grave, and bring back every person drowned at sea, cremated, or destroyed in some other way, to a final accounting This is no problem to the One who made something out of nothing when He spoke the universe into existence. *'It is appointed unto man once to die and then the judgment.'* That means we all face a final accounting.

THE RESURRECTION: *What are the implications?*

His resurrection means we have a great and living hope

'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.' 1 Peter 1:3 Buddhists have no hope, Hindus have no hope, Muslims have no hope — the best anyone without Christ has is wishful thinking. And it is all because Christ has been raised from the dead. *Dr. Seamands tells of a Muslim who became a Christian in Africa. "Some of his friends asked him, "Why have you become a Christian?" He answered, "Well, it's like this. Suppose you were going down the road and suddenly the road forked in two directions, and you didn't know which way to go, and there at the fork in the road were two men, one dead and one alive—which one would you ask for directions?"*

His resurrection means that He was who He said He was:

'I am the Resurrection and the life; He who believes in Me shall live even if He dies.' John 11:25 *'I am the way, the truth and the life; no man comes to the Father but through Me.'* John 14:6 Therefore any belief that contradicts this fact must be false. It doesn't matter what you believe to be true – if you do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ you are on your way to hell. And when you get there, don't blame anybody else but your own stubborn refusal to accept Christ. If this is true, then nothing is more important in our lives, nothing is more crucial or more urgent or more needful than believing it and becoming a follower of Jesus Christ.

His resurrection means that you need to settle the question of heaven or hell today.

If He is who He says He is, and final judgment is sure, then you need to make a decision. Will I accept the risen Savior as Lord of my life – or will I continue to live life on my own terms? It doesn't matter if you believe in heaven or hell – they're real. Heaven is eternal life with God, where all your pleasures are righteous, all your thoughts are pure, all your desires are God-borne and God-blessed – a place where the reality of full joy and perfect peace is not a myth or mere wish. Hell on the other hand, is very hot and very long – it is the absence of all the things that make heaven, heaven, and it lasts forever. Don't wait to find out you've been wrong – on that day it will be too late.

As Vice President, George Bush represented the U.S. at the funeral of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Bush was deeply moved by a silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow. She stood motionless by the coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's wife performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that must surely rank as one of the most profound acts of civil disobedience ever committed: She reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest. There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it all **hoped that her husband was wrong. She hoped that there was another life, and that that life was best represented by Jesus who died on the cross, and she hoped that the same Jesus might yet have mercy on her husband.** But the truth was, Brezhnev was gone – whatever choice he had to make, had been made, and now it remains for him to face that judgment day with the consequences of his choice.

Today is the day of salvation – don't harden your heart against Him. The Bible says, *'...if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord; and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.'* Romans 10:9 My prayer this morning is that you would respond to the Holy Spirit's call and the word of God and be saved.

Our gracious and loving Father,

We thank You this morning for sending Your Son to die for our sins on the cross. We rejoice that You accepted His sacrifice on our behalf by raising Him from the dead. We confess that we are sinners and we deserve Your righteous judgment. We have not loved You as we ought; we have chosen to go our own way; and in a thousand other ways we have sinned against heaven and against You. Forgive us O Lord, for our hard-hearted pride and deliberate sin. Forgive us for not loving You and counting You more precious than life. By the sacrifice of Jesus and by the power of His resurrection, forgive us our sins we pray and give us a new heart and cause us to walk in Your will. Grant Oh Lord, that we would serve you with the passion that we once served ourselves and that our highest joy would be to do what You want. Thank You for the promise of mercy and grace for those who repent. Show us the infinite and all satisfying glory of the risen Christ and give us hearts that love You supremely. Thank You that You do not leave us feeling fine in our sin and rebellion but in Your mercy you make us feel lost enough to be led to life. Fill us, Holy Spirit, with new life and a fresh desire to glorify God in our lives, we pray in the precious and powerful name of our resurrected Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

**May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.**