



A MORNING BEYOND BELIEF

Catalog No. 7152
 Matthew 28:1-10
 Gary Vanderet
 April 4th, 1999

The celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ at Easter is the most joyous time of the year in the Christian church. While there is uncertainty as to the birth date of Jesus, Easter is tied to the unchanging movements of the heavenly bodies, so there is no doubt about its date.

The resurrection of Jesus is absolutely central to Christianity. As Michael Green put it: "Christianity does not hold the resurrection to be one among many tenets of belief. Without faith in the resurrection there would be no Christianity at all. The Christian church would never have begun; the Jesus movement would have fizzled out like a damp firecracker with his execution. Christianity stands or falls with the truth of the resurrection. Once you disprove it, you have disposed of Christianity."

The resurrection is what gripped the first group of disciples as they cowered behind locked doors in Jerusalem, transforming them into a band of champions of their crucified Lord.

Earl Palmer tells a story about an experience he had while he was in seminary. He was a student at Princeton in New Jersey, and one summer after finals he and three friends drove home to the West Coast. They drove straight through, each taking turns behind the wheel. At one point during the trip, one of them was driving through a city in Iowa about three o'clock in the morning. He passed a gas station and then realized he probably should fill the gas tank, so he made a U-turn and went back to the gas station to fill up. He then awakened Earl to take over the next leg of the trip while he went into the back seat to take his turn sleeping. But he didn't tell him he had made a U-turn, so Earl drove out of the gas station and began driving back East.

He would drive for three hours before he realized he was going in the wrong direction. There were plenty of signs that should have alerted him to the fact that he was going the wrong way: mileage signs, road signs, advertisements. When a Greyhound bus went by with "Las Vegas" on the destination sign, he thought to himself, "they really should change those more often." But he ignored all the signs—until he saw the sun rise in front of him. He said, "When I saw the sun come up, that was too big a sign to ignore."

That is what many people still do today in the face of the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus: they ignore all the signs.

Critics who discount the resurrection tend to portray the disciples either as gullible, unsophisticated country folk with a fondness for ghost stories, or shrewd conspirators who thought up the resurrection to jump-start a new religion.

The skeptics propose several ingenious schemes to explain away the resurrection. One theory, popularized in 1960s by the book, *The Passover Plot*, claims that Jesus fainted on the cross due to the loss of blood brought about by the wounds inflicted upon him. According to this theory, when Jesus was placed in the tomb, the coolness of that place that had been cut out of limestone revived him and he got up and walked out. They say that the disciples were so excited about Jesus not being in the tomb when they came to it on that Sunday morning that they proclaimed him as the risen Lord.

But there is a major problem with this theory that Jesus merely fainted. To begin with, he had been beaten within an inch of his life. Then he was crucified, which was a Roman form of capital punishment. After several hours of languishing in agony on the cross, his side was pierced by a spear. A Roman centurion, a man who certainly recognized death when he saw it, certified to the Roman governor that Jesus of Nazareth was dead. In the tomb, Jesus would have been without water for approximately three days. It is inconceivable that he could shed his grave clothes, push away the stone which weighed hundreds of pounds, overpower two guards posted at the entrance to the tomb, walk all the way to Jerusalem on feet that had been pierced by nails, and then appear to the disciples as a victorious, risen Lord. That would have been a greater miracle than his resurrection.

Others hold that the disciples who approached the tomb that morning came to the wrong burial place, because they were confused by the darkness. Further, they claim that the man who was standing by the tomb, the one who said to the disciples, "He is not here," was indicating that Jesus was entombed in another location. But the angel did not merely say, "He is not here." He added the words: "He is risen!" In any event, it is impossible to believe that the number of people involved in the events of that Easter morning could all have come to the wrong tomb.

Others say that the report of the resurrection of Jesus was a form of mass hallucination. They suggest that the disciples so anticipated Jesus' resurrection that they actually convinced themselves he had risen from the

grave. But the apostle Paul wrote that over five hundred men and women saw the risen Lord on one occasion. Mass hysteria on such a scale would be most unlikely. Further, no one imagined that Jesus was going to rise from the dead, as the apostle John says in the passage we will look at later.

Others claim that the enemies of Jesus stole his body. But why would they do that? If his enemies were trying to suppress the gospel, why would they do something that would tend to support it? And if they had stolen the body, why didn't they produce it when the disciples began to preach that Jesus was risen from the dead?

Yet others say that the apostles stole the body. If that is what happened, we have to ask the question: Why then would they be willing to suffer death for their beliefs? All of the apostles, with the exception of John, died martyrs' deaths. People will die for what they sincerely believe in, but who would be willing to die for a hoax they had perpetrated? These men went to their deaths firmly believing in the resurrection of Jesus, and this is what was preached all over the Roman Empire. The caskets of Christians from the latter part of the first century, thirty years after Jesus' resurrection, have the words, "Jesus, risen," or, "Jesus, let him rise," inscribed on them in Greek, Aramaic or Latin—a prayer to Jesus for the resurrection of the deceased loved one.

So there is no question that the early church believed in the resurrection of Jesus. All four gospels record the events of that Easter morning.

For my text today I have chosen Matthew's account, from the twenty-eighth chapter of his gospel, beginning with verse 1:

Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. (NASB)

Matthew begins his account of the first Easter morning with a reminder of what must have been a depressing day for him: "Now after the Sabbath..." The Saturday before the resurrection was the most depressing and dark day the disciples had ever known. It was a day of shattered dreams, broken promises and crushed spirits. They no longer had any hope for the future. Every act must have been a drudge that day as everything within them cried out, "What's the use? Why go on?"

Many of us here probably know that feeling of hopelessness and despair. Ray Stedman had a term for this generation: "Saturday's Children," he called them. On one occasion he said: "Our great American cities are for the most part vast, teeming pools of human misery, where people live out their days in a kind of ritual dance toward death, without hope. In the midst of an increasingly godless world, despair grips people's hearts everywhere. Hopelessness and meaninglessness come crushing in on us from every side."

But something happened within the next few hours, "after the Sabbath." This event would so change the

lives and outlook of the disciples that when the time came to record these events, the day was so lost in the joy of the resurrection that it only justified these words, "Now after the Sabbath..." Hope had swallowed up their despair.

Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. (28:1-2)

In those days it was customary to visit the grave of a loved one on the third day after burial. The Jews had a superstitious belief that the soul did not leave the body until the third day after death. Mary Magdalene and some other women came to the tomb early in the morning, before it was light. We must remember that they did not expect to find that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They fully expected to see his body lying in that tomb, and their purpose was to anoint it with spices.

In the first century, the graves of the Jerusalem wealthy were cut into the limestone hills which surrounded the city. Gordon's Tomb, a possible burial site of Jesus, is a much visited site in the city today. This tomb, which is quarried from limestone, has a little chamber off to one side from which mourners could view a body. As Mary approached the entrance to the tomb on this Sunday morning it was dark. She couldn't see very well, but she could see that the stone had been rolled away. This alarmed her, because she thought the grave had been robbed—a common practice in those days, particularly with the graves of the wealthy. Thieves would break in and steal valuable items that were buried with the loved one. This was a capital offense, a very serious crime. Finding that the stone had been rolled away, Mary thought the grave had been robbed and the thieves had taken away the body of Jesus.

Matthew, however, records that in the middle of the night there was an earthquake, and the stone rolled away from the opening to the tomb, along a channel which was cut out underneath and to the side of the opening. This earthquake is also described as the angel of the Lord rolling away the stone—not to let Jesus *out* but to let the disciples *in* so that they could see that Jesus was risen.

Matthew continues, verses 3-6:

And his appearance was like lightning, and his garment as white as snow; and the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. And the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.

Long before daybreak, the angel had descended and rolled back the stone and was now sitting on it. His countenance was like lightning—bright and shining. He so dazzled the guards posted to protect the tomb that they fell to the ground like dead men. When they recovered, they ran off into the night in fear. All this happened before the women came. Arriving at the grave, Mary knew someone had been there. The angel spoke to calm her fear, saying, “This very same Jesus, the One you knew from Nazareth, whom you accompanied throughout Galilee and Judea, the Jesus who was crucified, whom you saw on the cross with the nails in his hands and the blood running down his side, that same One whom you are seeking, is risen from the dead.”

Entering the tomb, the women discovered that the body of Jesus was gone. The body which they had come to anoint was no longer there. That empty tomb is the answer to the arguments of critics throughout the centuries. No one has been able to explain it.

According to John’s account, the most amazing thing that confronted these women as they entered the tomb was the fact that though the body of Jesus was gone, the grave clothes remained, lying as though they were still wrapped around the body in the place where it had been laid. In those days, bodies were covered with ointment and oils that had a resin base, and then wrapped with linen. Sometimes a sheet was put around the body, and then it was wrapped in linen strips, like a mummy. In a few days the resin-based ointment and oils would soak through the bandages so that the wrappings set up like a plaster body cast. As the women looked into the tomb it appeared that the body of Jesus had evaporated through the grave clothes. It was gone! John tells us that when these women left the tomb they ran and told the disciples the news, and Peter and John then hastened to the tomb. Entering in and observing the grave clothes, they were convinced that Jesus had indeed risen. The appearance of these grave clothes has never been explained.

The account closes with the angels’ charge and the women’s electric response. Verses 7-10:

“And go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going before you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you.” And they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they shall see Me.”

The women departed the tomb with mixed emotions, “with fear and great joy,” according to the account. Can’t you see them running from the tomb, racing to where they think they will find the disciples, their robes flying behind them? On the way, Jesus himself met them and greeted them, and in an instant they were turned from Saturday’s children into Sunday’s children. Immediately they bowed down and worshipped him.

And that is what Christians do on this Easter day: In the face of the empty tomb we bow down and worship the risen Christ.

Every theory, ancient and modern, and every objection about the validity of the resurrection of Jesus is shattered by this one question: What became of Christ’s body? The rising of the Son is a sign too big to be ignored. Historians accept as fact occurrences for which they can produce only shreds of evidence, but the resurrection of Jesus was attested to by hundreds of witnesses who saw him, ate with him, talked with him, walked with him and knelt before him. If the statements of those who testified to what they saw on that Sabbath day and following cannot be accepted as conclusive evidence, then no testimony and no evidence can establish any truth of any age of history.

What was it that gripped that first group of disciples who were hiding in a room in Jerusalem and transformed them into a band of champions of their crucified Lord? Not a dead leader, certainly. What changed them utterly was a living, conquering Christ. What power and influence changed the cross from an instrument of blood torture into the most glorious and beloved of all symbols? The Romans crucified thousands of people before and after Calvary. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, no right-minded person would have glorified anything so hideous and repulsive as a cross.

It is that empty tomb that gives us hope this morning. The tomb is a pledge to us that if we believe in Christ, we too will be raised. The great problem of the human soul finds its solution at the empty tomb. In the resurrection of Christ we are assured that the short, perplexing life we live here on earth does not complete our destiny. The grave is not the end. We are not consigned to decay. With the rolling away of the great stone from the entrance to Jesus’ grave, every doubt concerning our own eternity is removed. It was in a garden ages ago that paradise was lost, and it was in a garden in Jerusalem on that first Easter morning that paradise was regained in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

© 1999 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino