

Evidence that Demands a Decision

One Easter Sunday some years ago, Rev. Jeffrey Sterling of Turtle Creek, PA., had a great idea for a children's sermon. He hung two giant letters in the front of the church. They were the letters "M" and "T." He was hoping that one of the kids would be clever enough to put two and two together and figure out that they stood for the word "empty," as in the "empty tomb."

So, when he called the children up to the front, he turned and looked at the letters and then asked, "What's different about the church today, kids?" To which his own daughter blurted out, "It's full, Dad."¹

I know that some of you are visitors or guests and I just want to say, "Welcome, we're glad you're here." And if you come back next week it will most likely be much easier to find a parking place!

This is Resurrection Sunday and it would be hard for anyone, whether they're religious or not, to argue that there is another event in the history of the world that's had a greater influence. Christianity is the largest religion in the world and it was this event that provided the impetus for its formation. On a philosophical level, Christianity has provided the greatest influence on the moral underpinnings of the western world. On a practical level, our calendars and our weekly schedules are set by the birth of Christ and the resurrection of Christ. Years are measured from His birth and the first day of each week is a commemoration of His resurrection. So, it would be hard to find another single day that has had more impact on our world. And why is that?

The Scripture passage today reads like an evidentiary hearing. There are witnesses, pieces of evidence and a crime scene. What we have here is a colossal "missing person's" case. If you're a watcher of TV crime shows, this is a "who dunit" for the ages. Some consider this an "unsolved mystery." Others see it as a galactic "mission impossible." But the question before us is this, "Does the evidence support the claim that this is the most important day in history?" First:

I. The Timeline of Events.

If you're a watcher of TV crime shows, you know that every legitimate investigation centers around a timeline. Here are the facts as we know them that surround the resurrection:

Thursday night – Jesus arrested, tried and convicted by the Jewish Sanhedrin. But the Jews do not have authority to execute their conviction, so...

Late Thursday, early Friday - Jesus is interrogated by various Roman authorities.

Friday morning – Pilate offers to free either Jesus or Barabbas. The crowd chooses Barabbas. Jesus is taken under Roman authority to be crucified.

Friday 9:00 a.m. to 3 p.m. (approximately) – Jesus is crucified on cross.

Friday before 6 p.m. – Jesus' body taken quickly to a burial place to meet Jewish regulations concerning the Sabbath. Roman guards are deployed to guard the tomb at the request of the Jewish leaders who fear a 'body snatching.'

Sunday before sunrise – Women go to tomb to anoint Jesus' body. Find the tomb empty. So, this brings us to John 20 where we read... (John 20:1-10)

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where

they have laid him.”³ So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. ⁴ Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.⁵ And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

Now, as a good investigative team would do, we need to hear from all the witnesses to piece together the truth. John only mentions Mary coming to the tomb but Mark says she came with two other women to anoint Jesus' body with spices which was a Jewish custom (Mark 16). And according to Matthew, the Roman guards were still there when the women arrived (Matt. 28). But the stone covering the entrance was rolled away. When Mary saw that, she panicked and ran to tell Peter. Eventually, an angel appeared and told the other two women and the Roman guards that Jesus had risen, but Mary apparently wasn't there to hear that and so when she found Peter, she told him:

They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him. (John 20:2)

But the other women knew he had risen, because Jesus appeared to them. And even the guards knew the truth because they saw the angel move the stone! They even told this truth to the Jewish leaders. Matthew records it:

...some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, “Tell people, His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.” And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble. So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day. (Matt. 28: 11b-15)

Have you heard this story about the disciples stealing the body of Jesus? It's fake news on a cosmic scale and there are several easy means to prove it wrong. First, any Roman soldier falling asleep while on duty would've been executed in the morning. Secondly, the construction of the tomb was such that it would've taken a dozen men plus horses to move the stone once it was in place. And thirdly, this Roman guard unit was made up of 16 elite soldiers. They were trained to withstand an attack of an entire battalion of enemy forces. So, to say that the eleven disciples could've overpowered these guards is something only Hollywood could imagine.

No, by the written evidence of at least 19 eye witnesses, Jesus' resurrection was caused by divine intervention. Then secondly, we must also examine the evidence of...

II. The Tone of these Testimonies.

What do I mean by tone? I mean what was the level of commitment of each witness to their story. For example, several witnesses believed immediately that Jesus had been resurrected and at least one never wavered in that belief. John is the one who believed from the moment he saw the empty tomb. Verse 8 is John speaking of himself when he says:

Then the other disciple; the one who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed. (John 20:8)

Two other witnesses displayed skepticism at first but eventually believed. This would be Peter and Mary Magdalene. Matthew says that Peter didn't believe the women who had seen Jesus at first, just as Mary did not. Mary saw the empty tomb and jumped to the conclusion that

someone had stolen the body (Jn. 20:2). But both Peter and Mary eventually fully believed after receiving more evidence. Peter believed after seeing the empty tomb and Mary after seeing Jesus Himself. Skeptics at first, but eventually both became ardent believers.

And the last group, the Roman guards, believed at first but eventually denied what they earlier said had happened. Only the Roman guards didn't change their story because of more evidence. They changed their stories for one reason: money.

...they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" ...So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day. (Matt. 28:12b, 13, 15)

The tone then of all the eye witnesses is that they all believed that Jesus had died, been buried and then miraculously rose again. The Roman soldiers believed it and reported it to the Jewish leaders. If they didn't believe it, there would've been no reason for the bribe.

Now, if Jesus had come in our day and been crucified or killed in an electric chair, we would have witnesses we could interview. We'd be able to give them lie detector tests and there would've been security cameras at the tomb for all of us to see for ourselves. But with an ancient historical event, we don't have those means of checking the evidence. But we do have other reliable ways of checking the truth of this story. Let me show you one way.

Many of the prophets of the Old Testament predicted very specific details of this story of Jesus' arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. And these predictions were made hundreds of years earlier. Here are some of those predictions:

- Accused by false witnesses (Ps. 35:11)
- Sold for 30 pieces of silver (Zech. 11:12)
- Beaten with a rod (Micah 5:1)
- Spit on and whipped (Isaiah 50:6)
- Hands and feet pierced (Ps. 22:16)
- That He would be crucified between two thieves (Is. 53:12)
- Not a bone broken (Ps. 34:20)
- Offered vinegar to drink (Ps. 69:21)
- Darkness over the land (Amos 8:9)
- That he would be buried in a rich man's tomb (Is. 53:9)
- That He would be raised from the dead (Ps. 16:10)

That's just eleven prophecies about this story. There are more. So, what's the probability that one person could fulfill all these detailed facts in one life event? Well, as I said, I've listed eleven but for only eight specific events to be fulfilled by chance in one person's lifetime the probability would be 1 in 10 to the 17th power. That's a 1 with 17 zeros after it.

So, this brings us to our final point regarding this remarkable story, which is this...

III. What Do You Make of This Evidence?

Let's focus on Mary for moment. After Peter and John went in the tomb, they saw the evidence and believed and it says, they went home. But Mary still wasn't convinced. Listen:

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him,

and I will take him away.”¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (John 20:11-16)

Mary had been given a lot of evidence. She’d seen the empty tomb, angels, Roman guards who were scared stiff. She even saw and heard Jesus Himself, still it didn’t register with her what had happened. Why not? Others were convinced with just one piece of evidence!

Well, of all the witnesses in this story, Mary was the one with the most issues. Mark tells us that she was the one from whom Jesus removed seven demons. Seven! Do you think you might have some “trust issues” if you’d been possessed by seven demons?

But there was one final piece of evidence that convinced Mary of what was true. Jesus called her by name. Verse 16, *Jesus said to her, “Mary.”* Instantly she knew it was Jesus.

Is it possible that the reason all this “evidence” isn’t enough for you is because you have “issues” with God? Have you ever thought, “If there’s a God, how could he let all this horrible stuff happen to me?” Like Mary, as you look at the evidence of an empty tomb today, is your only response to stand weeping with a broken heart?

Well, I have one more piece of evidence for you. What Jesus said to Mary, He’s saying right now to you. He’s saying, “...*why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?*” Just because you do not see His angels doesn’t mean they aren’t near. Just because you’ve never heard the audible voice of Jesus, doesn’t mean He doesn’t have something to say to you. He sent me to tell you this:

Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28, 29)

Isn’t that really what you need today, rest for your soul? You’ve heard the story again, you’ve seen the evidence. But most importantly, just now in your heart, didn’t you hear Him call you by name? When Mary heard her name, that was all the evidence she needed. From that day forward, Mary knew she was safe. Let this be the defining day for your personal history just as it was for world history. Let this be the day of new life for you. Let this day be your day of spiritual resurrection. If you want new life, I invite you to pray this prayer silently with me:

Lord Jesus,

I heard you call my name today. And I say, “Yes. Yes, I want you in my life. Yes, I admit that I’ve contributed to the mess my life has become. Forgive me for not following you and your ways. Remove my guilt and make me your son, your daughter right now. Thank you for your great love.” Amen.

If you prayed that prayer with me, then you’re forgiven and God has just put His spirit of peace within you. On your way out today, we have a packet of information that might help you to know how to grow spiritually. Just go out to the table on the left that says, **Next Steps** and tell the person there, “I said Yes today.” This is the day new life begins for you. Amen.

¹ Cal and Rosa Samra, *Holy Humor* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), p. 60