

“Jesus Is Alive – Really!”
Luke 24:1-12 (11)

Last week we celebrated Jesus' resurrection. This highlight of our Christian faith has been celebrated for more than 2 millennia; in fact, each Sunday that we gather to worship is a reminder of Jesus' resurrection. Then and to this day, many simply cannot accept that Jesus rose from the dead. Christians are accused of having a faith that is blinded by our love for Jesus and of only seeing what we want to see in Jesus. I can understand why; I've conducted over 300 funerals in my career and never once have the deceased come back to life. To the human mind, resurrection doesn't seem plausible. Even the disciples couldn't get their heads around it. Listen to the Easter story as recorded in Luke (*Read text here*).

“But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed like nonsense.”

Sometimes things seem like nonsense because we overlook obvious clues.

Lee Strobel, formerly the legal editor for the Chicago Tribune, shares this story:

I picked up my phone at the Chicago Tribune and was assaulted by the sobbing, frantic voice of a distraught father, his nineteen-year-old daughter was missing, he said. She was a good girl, never in any trouble, not much more than an innocent child – and now she was gone. The police weren't helping. Could I alert the city to her disappearance?

Moved by his anguish, I began to pursue the story. But when I interviewed his daughter's friends and the police, a much different story emerged. Tragically, it turned out she had been a drug addict, a petty criminal, the girlfriend of a gang member, and a part-time prostitute. When police found her body a few days later, they determined she had been the victim of a heroine overdose.

I didn't have the heart to tell her father all the details I had learned about her life-style he sincerely believed she was an innocent child, but he had been wrong. His love for his daughter had blinded him. He had seen what he wanted to see, overlooking obvious clues that pointed in another direction.

Like the father in Lee's story, those who doubt the resurrection are overlooking obvious clues which do point in another direction. The resurrection accounts found in the Gospels and attested to in the rest of the New Testament are not of forgery, fabrication, or legend. Any sensible mythmaker would have written the story much differently. Consider the following clues:

The disciples began preaching the news of Jesus' resurrection shortly after it happened. Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, boldly declares God raised Jesus from the dead just 50 days after the resurrection. Written accounts of the resurrection, especially Paul's witness in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, are very early in origin, possibly within two years. Such early origins argue for personal experience and against any notion that the resurrection accounts are legendary.

The belief in Jesus' resurrection originated in Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified. The Christian faith did not begin in some far away place, disconnected from eyewitnesses who knew of Jesus' death and burial. Rather, Christianity began in the very city Jesus had been publicly crucified, under the very eyes of its enemies.

Eyewitnesses were named. At least 16 individuals were mentioned by name as witnesses of the various accounts. Mentioning Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin who was well known and the man who buried Jesus body, would have been dangerous if the story was a fake. If the accounts were fabricated, the women would not have been included in the story as they would not have been considered legal witnesses in that day. Paul mentions that Jesus met with 500 people after his resurrection and that many of them were still alive at his writing, leaving the impression that Paul was inviting people to check it out for themselves.

A legend would have included impressive (even fantastic) details about the event of Jesus coming back to life. But according to all the New Testament accounts, no human eye saw the resurrection, no disciples were present, and the disciples do not pretend to understand how

resurrection happens. Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapidé states it is “precisely because none of the Evangelists dared to improve upon or embellish this unseen resurrection, the total picture of the gospels also gains in trustworthiness.”

The “eyewitness” accounts are different. Critics have pointed out differences and apparent contradictions in each of the Gospel writers’ accounts. However, if all our accounts were identical the writers would be suspected of collusion, just as witnesses would be in our courts today. The primary facts are the same; it is in the secondary details that differences show up, giving evidence to individual independent sources and experiences.

The location of the tomb is disclosed. If the resurrection is not truth, then details would necessarily need to be limited. But the tomb’s location is disclosed in detail: The owner of the tomb is Joseph of Arimathea. Its location is near where Jesus was crucified in a garden. It’s a new tomb. A stone was put in front of it; now it’s rolled away. The body of Jesus is gone, but the burial linens are still where the body should be; except for the head covering, which is neatly folded. The sense is, “you can see for yourself.”

The disciples were willing to die for the truth. Lee Strobel has written, “People will die for their religious beliefs if they sincerely believe they’re true, but people won’t die for their religious beliefs if they know their beliefs are false.” The disciples were not only in a position of faith, they knew without a doubt Jesus had risen from the dead. They saw him, talked with him, and ate with him. They knew it was Jesus! If they weren’t absolutely certain, they would have preached a less controversial message of love and peace instead of the need for repentance and salvation in Jesus alone that invited opposition and persecution from both civil and religious authorities. If they weren’t absolutely certain Jesus was alive, they wouldn’t have allowed themselves to be tortured and put to death for proclaiming that the resurrection had happened.

Why is it so important to us that Jesus actually rose from the dead? This question was posed to Gary Habermas, PH.D, Dr. of Divinity, author of several books, Chair of the Dept. of Philosophy and Theology and director of the master's program in apologetics at Liberty University, no-nonsense expert on the resurrection, and defender of the faith. In response, the quick-fire debater did not quote scholars, cite Scripture, or build a case. Instead, he described what happened in 1995, when his wife, Debbie, slowly died of stomach cancer:

"I sat on our porch," he began, looking off to the side at nothing in particular. He sighed deeply, then went on. "My wife was upstairs dying. Except for a few weeks, she was home through it all. It was an awful time. This was the worst thing that could possibly happen.

"But do you know what was amazing? My students would call me – not just one but several of them – and say, 'at a time like this, aren't you glad about the resurrection?' As sober as those circumstances were, I had to smile for two reasons. First my students were trying to cheer me up with my own teaching. And second, it worked.

"As I would sit there, I'd picture Job, who went through all that terrible stuff and asked questions to God, but then God turned the tables and asked him a few questions.

"I knew if God were to come to me, I'd ask only one question: 'Lord, why is Debbie up there in bed?' and I think God would respond by asking gently, "Gary, did I raise my Son from the dead?'

"I'd say, 'Come on, Lord, I've written seven books on that topic! Of course he was raised from the dead. But I want to know about Debbie!'

"I think he'd keep on coming back to the same question – 'Did I raise my Son from the dead?' – until I got his point: the resurrection says that if Jesus was raised two thousand years ago, there's an answer to Debbie's death in 1995. And do you know what? It worked for me while I was sitting on the porch, and it still works today.

"It was a horribly emotional time for me, but I couldn't get around the fact that the resurrection is the answer for her suffering. I still worried what I'd do raising four kids alone. But there wasn't a time when that truth didn't comfort me.

“Losing my wife was the most painful experience I’ve ever had to face, but if the resurrection could get me through that, it can get me through anything. It was good for AD30, it was good for 1995, and it’s good beyond that.

“That’s not some sermon. I believe that with all my heart. If there’s resurrection, there’s heaven. If Jesus was raised, Debbie will be raised. And I will be someday, too. Then I’ll see them both.”

(The Case for Easter, Lee Strobel, 83-84)

Paul said, *“If Christ has not been raised from the dead [our] faith is futile; [we] are still in [our] sins ... we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep... For as in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive”* (1 Cor.15:17-22).