

"Can We Trust the Resurrection?"

1 Corinthians 15:1-19

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Believe it or not, many people are quite surprised when I tell them that it was never my intention to INITIALLY become a minister. Rather, my DREAM JOB was to be an ARCHEOLOGIST because it combined my deep love of history with a fascination with old bones and all things long dead. Thus you can imagine my excitement when several years ago, I learned how an expedition to locate the remains of old King Richard III ended in success when his remains were at long last discovered in central England. Richard was one of the most famous kings of England, remembered by school children and Shakespeare buffs alike as a notorious villain. Hunchbacked and hateful, he is accused of having killed his own nephews—the two young princes--in the Tower of London to usurp the royal throne. According to the history books, in August of 1495, Richard--the last English king to die in battle--rode out from Leicester to the Battle of Bosworth Field where he met his bloody end. Days afterward, his body was unceremoniously returned to the city lashed to the back of a horse. His naked remains were then placed on display to prove to everyone that he was INDEED dead before being dumped into a nondescript grave at a nearby church, covered with a simple shroud, and then buried for the ages- that was over 500 years ago. Until 2012, the whereabouts of his burial plot had remained a complete mystery. What made that discovery all the MORE intriguing was that his bones were not located in a churchyard somewhere or on the grounds of a royal palace but under a parking lot in the middle of a large urban city.

Of course, such expeditions have not just been limited to Egyptian pharaohs and English kings. Over the years, there have even been efforts made to locate the bones of JESUS CHRIST. Several years ago, the Discovery Channel aired a two-hour special entitled “The Lost Tomb of Jesus” which attempted to prove, though not very convincingly, that a tomb discovered back in 1980 was actually the grave of Jesus, that he had married Mary Magdalene and had a son named Judah. The claim was that upon their deaths, all three were laid to rest in a family tomb that is now buried deep beneath a Jerusalem apartment complex.

In light of such an assertion, I had to ask myself that if it WAS possible to prove once and for all that the tomb of Jesus HAD been discovered, if it could be clearly demonstrated that the small ossuary or stone box with his name on it did IN FACT once hold the bones of our Lord, then what kind of effect would it have upon my faith? Could I still maintain my belief in Christ if that faith no longer could support the idea of his resurrection? After all, doesn't Paul assert rather emphatically in our N.T. lesson that “if Christ is not risen...then your faith is in vain?” Would God or Jesus Christ or the Church or even LIFE ITSELF still have meaning and validity if it were determined that he died just like any other man and three days later REMAINED dead?

But before we can answer that question, we need to be clear as to why Christ's resurrection remains important to us and the Church in general. Easter is REALLY what Christianity is about- a religion of resurrection. Dr. James Stewart, the great Scottish preacher, admits that the resurrection has too often been regarded as "an EPILOGUE to the Gospel, an

ADDENDUM to the scheme of salvation, a CODICIL to the divine last will and testament- thereby falsifying disastrously the whole emphasis of the Bible." The fact is that WITHOUT the resurrection, there would have been no New Testament and thus no "Good News" for us this morning. "This was no mere appendix to the faith," Dr. Stewart writes. "This was, this IS the faith- the over-powering, magnificent good news. Rejoice that the Lord is ARISEN!"

Father Romano Guardino was one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the 20th century. He had this to say about the primacy of resurrection for the Church: "...with Jesus' Resurrection stands or falls Christian faith. It is no supplement to that faith, also no mythological development, briefly acquired for historical purposes, to be dropped without danger. It is the CENTER of our religion."

By raising Jesus from the dead, his Heavenly Father was placing his imprimatur, his Good Housekeeping seal of approval upon him and declaring for all the world to hear, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant!" As a result, there are at least four reasons I can think of why the "resurrection" IS and MUST remain central to our faith. FIRST, it validated our Lord's mission and his claim to be the Son of God, the long-expected Messiah. His followers now knew that Jesus was who he SAID he was. There were many false messiahs at the time of Christ who claimed to be the coming Savior- but one-by-one they all were executed and eventually REMAINED dead. ONLY JESUS confirmed who he said he was when he was raised up from death afterwards.

SECONDLY, the resurrection validated Christ's teaching, that every word out of his mouth could indeed be trusted as faithful and true.

THIRDLY, it attested to the fact that his work as the "Lamb of God" who bore our sins upon that cross had finally been accomplished. Atonement had been made once and for all with the effect that we were now accounted as righteous before God- "washed in his blood" as the scriptures say.

And FINALLY, it served as a witness to all his followers that even as the SON had overcome the forces of sin and death, so too was that power broken for US; that even as HE had been raised up from the grave, so too would WE be resurrected when time and history had reached their ultimate conclusion. So you see, Christianity really IS a religion with "resurrection" at its heart. There is no GREATER affirmation or exclamation in all the world than the words "Rejoice! The Lord is RISEN!"

However, the description we have of the various resurrection scenes and those of Jesus' own post-resurrection appearances reveal that his resurrection was MORE than just an historical event. What happened to Christ on the third day had COMPLETELY TRANSFORMED him so that afterwards, he was PHYSICALLY different than if it had been you or me who died. For instance, when Lazarus was raised from the dead after four days in the tomb, it might be more appropriate to say that he was "RESUSCITATED," that is, the act of being revived after being declared dead and then returning to consciousness. However, when JESUS was raised after three days, he was "RESURRECTED," meaning that yes, he TOO was restored to life after being dead. But UNLIKE Lazarus, he was not the same as he was before- afterwards, he was PHYSICALLY CHANGED. It was an event which theologians would call "EXTRA-

HISTORICAL” or outside the boundaries of ordinary historical occurrence. For instance, we’re informed that his grave clothes remained perfectly in place even though his body was no longer present. We know that Mary did not recognize him when he appeared to her at the garden tomb, nor did the two disciples on their way back to Emmaus when he walked and talked with them throughout the afternoon. John tells us that Christ suddenly and mysteriously appeared to his disciples that first Easter night in the Upper Room although “the doors and windows were shut for fear of the Jews,” and he did the same thing A WEEK LATER when he appeared before them, but this time with Thomas present. Clearly, there was something different about him in his resurrected state than before his death that showed he possessed something MORE than a physical body and that this was MORE than the usual historical event.

Well now I’d like to return to my original question of whether Christ would CONTINUE to hold significance for us if it were proven once and for all that the bones of our Lord had finally been found. I would say the answer to that question is an unqualified YES and that is because my faith in Christ does not rest upon the discovery of any bones or positively-identified archeological evidence. You see, the Christian faith is based on the EVENT of the resurrection and NOT on any EVIDENCE for his resurrection. There are many real events in history for which the historical evidence is slim or nonexistent- in fact, MOST events in history are this way. Still, they happened ALL THE SAME- we just have no way of PROVING it.

Now speaking for myself, the most COMPELLING proof of the resurrection has NEVER been the empty tomb. For instance, nobody has ever yet determined where the tomb was situated, whether it resides where the Church of the Holy Sepulcher presently stands inside Jerusalem’s walls, or outside the city at the place known as the “Garden Tomb.” I have visited both sites and most likely it is neither of them but some other place entirely which we’ll never know. RATHER, the initial evidence of the resurrection for me FIRST lies in the lives of the DISCIPLES THEMSELVES who in a matter of days went from being terrified members of a failed movement, cowering behind closed doors, into men and women emboldened to preach about Jesus even at great cost to their own lives. They had encountered someone or something that profoundly changed them at their core- reinvigorating their hope and reorienting them once again towards the future and their mission. I believe that only AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE RISEN CHRIST could account for such a dramatic transformation. Why else would they subject themselves to such hardship and oppression, why else would they endure shipwrecks and imprisonments and even death itself for the cause of Christ unless they had some assurance that he was present to them and going to accompany them every step along the way in their journeys.

A SECOND proof to me has been in the examples of resurrection life I see all around me. Believe me, they are there if only we have the eyes to see them! What more powerful proof of the living presence of Jesus Christ can there be than in those followers who consistently demonstrate an uncommon humility and love in their daily lives. Such persons become for ME the LIVING EMBODIMENT of the Risen Lord, and through their encouraging words and quiet acts of charity, any DOUBTS I might have as to the reality of a resurrected Savior are slowly put to rest. I can’t begin to tell you of how many Christians I’ve met--both young AND old-- who trace their belief in God back to a faith-filled, prayerful mother or father, grandparent or friend who convinced them of God’s love merely by the simple testimony of their own lives. They said to themselves, “if this is what it means to be a Christian, then I want to be one; if this is what

Jesus Christ looks like, then I want to follow him."

If I need proof as to the reality of the Risen Lord, I need look no further than among the Christians I have known and worked with in my OWN congregations throughout the years. When I observe the simple acts of love and concern performed by persons such as yourselves- when you take a shut-in shopping, when you do volunteer work for the local hospital, when you offer a meal to a hungry stranger, when you visit a sick neighbor, when you comfort a grieving friend- on the scale of GOD'S values, THIS is what Jesus regards as TRULY important. When you send cards or take flowers to one of our shut-ins, when you pick them up to bring them to church and then make sure they get safely home afterwards; when you stay after a service or dinner to help clean up so that all the work is not left for just a few; when you selflessly volunteer for a task or ministry because you feel that our church and community will be better because of it, you exemplify all that is highest and best about the Christian faith and that is tangible proof of Christ living in you and through our fellowship. It might not SEEM like you've accomplished much in your OWN eyes but in CHRIST'S, it is the ESSENCE of true ministry and what his kingdom is all about! What more powerful proof to the reality of the living Christ in you and in our midst can there be than the concrete deeds, the acts of mercies that every day touch the lives of the people around us.

But there is still one FINAL proof for me of the resurrected Christ and the one I also find MOST CONVINCING OF ALL. For that, I must appeal to one of the greatest minds and most profound Christian thinkers to ever live- the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal. Between the hours of half past 10 and half past midnight on Monday, Nov. 23, 1654, the feast day of St. Clement, he claims that Jesus appeared to him. In that one instant, all doubt was gone, God was real, and the Christian story was all true. He wrote that night in his journal, "Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. God of Jesus Christ. My God and your God." He subsequently abandoned his interest in mathematics and science to devote the rest of his life to theology and philosophy. For Pascal, God was REAL and Christ was ALIVE, and because he had PERSONALLY received a vision of him, he could NEVER have doubts again. This was not unlike the vision that the great persecutor of the ancient church, SAUL OF TARSUS, had of Christ on the Damascus road which eventually transformed HIM into ST. PAUL, the GREATEST Apostle the world had ever known.

Like Pascal, my OWN encounter with the Risen Lord remains for ME the ULTIMATE proof as to the reality of Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection. Unlike Pascal or St. Paul, I didn't have a vision of him but I did have an experience in a church service many years ago that changed my life as I shared with you in a recent sermon. That was forty-eight years ago and I've never once looked back! The reality is that you can READ about him in the Bible or in some theological textbook, or you might HEAR about him on the radio or on TV, but if you've never MET the Risen Lord, if you've never had your OWN life touched and transformed by him PERSONALLY through his Holy Spirit, then you'll NEVER be able to know the truth of his resurrection. As the Apostle Paul summed up for the Christian church in Philippi that which was the greatest goal and highest aspiration of his life, "O that I might KNOW him, and the POWER of his resurrection, and the FELLOWSHIP of his sufferings, that I might become CONFORMABLE to him in his death, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead!"

Friends, what GREATER proof does one need as to the reality of Jesus Christ and of the power of his resurrection than our OWN personal encounter with the Risen Lord. If ANY man, woman or child knows Christ, if any has had his or her own life touched and transformed by him, that person is ALREADY a witness to the reality of Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection- and that includes YOU AND ME! As children of God who have ALREADY experienced his resurrection life within us, we, in turn, become proof to the REST of the world-- to our family, to our neighbors, to our co-workers, to WHOMEVER God happens to bring our way--that Jesus Christ is REAL, that Jesus Christ is ALIVE, and what's more, that Jesus Christ is now PHYSICALLY PRESENT before them in the very guise of YOU AND ME! God thereby entrusts US to be the GREATEST EVIDENCE and the ONLY PROOF the world will ever need as to the reality of our resurrected Lord. Under the direction and empowerment of his personal spirit, WE become his HANDS- to aid and assist whomever God sends our way; WE become his FEET- going into those places that others would rather avoid; WE become his VOICE- crying out for justice for those who no longer have a voice of their own. Let others continue to speculate about his bones; let them argue amongst themselves as to whether he was raised or not, or whether it was a physical or spiritual resurrection. And while they continue to talk and argue and speculate, WE, on the other hand, shall continue to offer the MOST CONVINCING PROOF OF ALL as to his living presence- through our VERY OWN LIVES! Let us pray...

Father, you have asked us to base any understanding we have of you or your son on faith. And though we can't see you with our eyes, or hear you with our ears, or touch you with our hands, we know you are REAL all the same. We have read your Word and it has testified of you; we have learned the history of your Church and how it has witnessed to your power in their lives; and we have felt your personal touch and calming presence in our OWN lives during some of the most tumultuous and tragic moments life has to offer. May the witness of your own love TO us and THROUGH us serve as proof to others of your very existence that they in turn may personally become that SAME proof to somebody else. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.