

UNDENIABLE PROOF

Mark 16:1-8 CEV

Did Jesus rise from the dead? Was the Tomb really empty? What if CBC's lead story on the news tonight was about an archeological discovery that showed undeniably that the Tomb was *not* empty, and that the cornerstone of Christian faith was a hoax? Would you feel foolish that you had participated in an almost 2,000 year-old ritual by saying three times: "He is risen indeed!" (as we did just a little while ago?) What would you now think of the account from the Gospel of Mark that Reg read for us, where the young man, the angel, said:

"You are looking for Jesus from Nazareth, who was nailed to a cross. God has raised him to life, and he isn't here. You can see the place where they put his body." Mark 16:6 CEV

Four years ago I saw two places where history seems to believe they "put His body", where Jesus' tomb was located. The first, and the one that most Christian religious denominations revere is located in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. It was impressive. Calvary, where Jesus was crucified and the tomb where He was buried are both encompassed by this grand structure, first built in the year 333. I was able to kneel at this spot inside the church and I could put my hand down through a hole to touch the rocky soil where it is said Jesus' Cross was thrust into the ground.

Then I went to the second place called "The Garden Tomb," another place where Jesus' body was said to have been buried. I liked it better because it seemed so serene, so plain and unadorned, yet at the same time so sacred. More my style, I guess. Not so much hype. There were fewer people there and as I stepped inside I was conscious of the reverence of others around me. I felt that surely this must be the place.

But what if this *wasn't* the place? What if Jesus' Body had been buried in a third place, and only recently discovered? Or, what if this was the place where Jesus was buried, but the empty spot where the Body had been placed is only empty because it had been stolen overnight? What if we've been misled over all these years, and we've been preaching about resurrection life without any proof to back it up?

Several years ago, in 2007, just before the television airing of "The Lost Tomb of Jesus" on the Discovery Channel, The New York Times published an article that said: "A documentary by the Discovery Channel claims to provide evidence that a crypt unearthed 27 years ago in Jerusalem contained the bones of Jesus of

Nazareth. Moreover, it asserts that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, that the couple had a son, named Judah, and that all three were buried together. ... Two limestone boxes said to contain residue from the remains of Jesus and Mary Magdalene were unveiled yesterday at a news conference at the New York Public Library by the documentary's producer, James Cameron, who made *Titanic* and *The Terminator*.”ⁱ

Now, that was in February of 2007. There hasn't been much stir about it since. In fact I've heard nothing. This startling revelation has fizzled, but not before Cameron and cohorts pocketed some cash. But, as others have been doing, are doing and will keep doing since Jesus' death, the ubiquitous “they” are still popping up with the same question: “What if Jesus did not rise bodily from the grave?” What would that do to your faith? Would you want to come out to church every Sunday to celebrate His resurrection if in fact God did *not* raise Him from the dead?

There's been a fascinating discussion on the Wall Street Blog about this very thing. Our gifted saxophonist with Fuzion, Hugh Gardiner, got a number of people thinking a week ago about this. Hugh said:

“A Facebook friend of mine who lives in Japan is an amateur photographer. Looking through his Facebook photo album I found a picture that he had taken of an advertisement in the window of a store in Japan that said in big letters, “Jesus Body!” (I think there must have been something mixed up in translation because it seems to be an advert for some kind of medication, or vitamin supplement). Looking at this photo I jokingly said to myself, ‘Well then, if the Japanese have found Jesus' Body, I guess Easter will have to be cancelled!’ And then Hugh's question: “What if it was proven that the tomb wasn't empty?”ⁱⁱ

Someone named Pam answered Hugh's question by saying:

“I remember struggling with the resurrection story as a new Christian. But that shouldn't be a big surprise because I am a skeptic by nature anyway. I totally relate to doubting Thomas, as I am generally a seeing- is-believing sort of person. In fact, finding proof of Jesus' body existing at all would have been very comforting to me. However, when I allowed myself to believe the story, is when I started to “experience” God. The self examination of Lent, the excitement of Palm Sunday, the loneliness of Maundy Thursday, the grief and confusion of Friday, and the realization and wonderment of the 3rd day. The Easter story contains all of the emotions and stages of our lives. This story has led me through some tough situations in my life more than once. Some kind of CSI or archeological evidence will not change how the story has affected me and brought me closer to God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I happen to know who this Pam is, and I can understand her struggle with grasping the concept of Jesus' physical resurrection. She works in the medical field, and the thought of an actual corpse with huge blood loss becoming animated and alive does

boggle a scientifically-oriented mind. But when she started “to experience God” through faith, it began to all come together.

One of my texts at Queen’s was entitled *Faith Seeking Understanding*. The title of the book (and of course its contents) addresses how we handle the gap between our rational thinking (our understanding) and our belief system. And, it’s not in the order we may think. We don’t need to understand everything in order to believe. But by believing we can be led into understanding.

Back in the fourth century St. Augustine asserted: *Crede, ut intelligas* (“Believe in order that you may understand”). For Augustine, faith (“trust in a reliable source”) is an indispensable element in knowledge. One must believe in *something* in order to know *anything*. Knowledge begins with faith and faith provides a foundation for knowledge. Faith and reason do not conflict, but instead complement one another. ^{iv} Augustine also said:

“Faith gives the understanding access to these things, unbelief *closes* the door to them.”^v

It seemed that the Apostle Paul thought it was important what sort of a position we took on this business of Jesus’ resurrection. He said, just 20 to 25 years after Jesus’ death, even earlier than the Gospel account read by Reg:

“... if Christ wasn’t raised to life, our message is worthless, and so is your faith. If the dead won’t be raised to life we have told lies about God saying that he raised Christ to life, when he really did not. ... If our hope in Christ is good only for this life, we are worse off than anyone else. But Christ *has been* raised to life! And he makes us certain that others will also be raised to life.”(1 Corinthians 15:14,15,19,20 CEV)

Paul tied Jesus’ resurrection directly to the hope that we have for eternal life. He was a little stronger than I might have been, personally, when he said “If our hope in Christ is good only for this life we are worse off than anyone else.” I think following Jesus on this side of Eternity is a great way to live. But, I do understand where he was coming from: if the resurrection hadn’t happened, then it casts doubt on everything else that went along with the arrival of Jesus on earth. It almost suggests that the whole thing is shaky, that if there’s a hole in the *center* of the story, there are probably some other holes somewhere else.

I have personally discovered throughout my lifetime that by *believing*, my own experiential understanding of the reality of God has made sense. It’s always been in that order: trust – understanding. Trust – experience. It has been that sequence that has brought me to this point in my life, preaching my farewell sermon at an amazing church doing wonderful things in the Brockville community,... and around the world, for that matter.

I want to tell you about a pivotal moment in my life, a turning point that headed me in the direction that has brought me to this place. It is a “faith seeking

understanding”, and “trust resulting in experience” story that established beyond any doubt for me that Jesus is alive, that He is risen indeed.

Sixteen years ago I was at a low point in my spiritual life. I was becoming the person I least liked: critical, grouchy, and negative. I was the organist and choir director for a little church down-river, but after seven or eight years I would consistently leave after each service in a bad mood. I was especially critical of the pastor. Having been in ministry in my 20’s, as I told in my story last Sunday night, I was seeing things that probably the congregation didn’t see. I kept visioning ways in which things could be done so much better.

Of course, this also coincided with the increasing pressure I was feeling, the nudges from God that came more frequently about my returning to full-time Christian service. The thought that kept coming, in response to my critical spirit, which I am sure was God’s voice, said: “What are *you* going to do about it? If you’re going to criticize and not respond to my call, you should have nothing to say!” But for every God-poke I had an answer as to why I *couldn’t* do anything about it: “The only denomination where I would be able to serve with integrity is the United Church. And they will require a Masters of Divinity. I’m too old to go back to school”; “I probably couldn’t handle a Master’s level course load”; “what would I do for finances?”; “I’d have to quit my job at Algonquin College” ... yadda, yadda, yadda.

Quite often, during my morning devotions, I would walk to the “back forty”, and pray as I walked. I remember one Monday morning after a particularly negative experience at church walking down the hill at the back of the house, and praying this prayer. I can even remember the words:

Oh God ... How can I ever claw my way back up out of this ever-descending spiral of negativity?

With my trusted three-legged companion, Nessa, by my side, we walked in silence for another five minutes before we entered the first bush. I stopped suddenly as we broke into the back fields, because on a lone, dead Elm by the ditch dividing two fields, perched this huge bird. White head, white tail – you know where I’m going with this, now – and as we stood motionless, the immense bald eagle took off. I think Nessa sensed this was a special moment because she sat patiently beside me.

I watched for a good ten to fifteen minutes as this amazing bird, always a symbol to me of the Holy Spirit, soared effortlessly overhead. Not a feather seemed to move. A deep peace came over me, an answer to my prayer of moments before, because my life verse has always been Isaiah 40:31:

“...those who trust the Lord will find new strength. They will be strong like eagles, soaring upwards on wings; they will walk and run without getting tired.” Isaiah 40:31 CEV

My decision was made. At 55 years of age, I resigned my paid and voluntary positions, enrolled at Queen’s, started the process of transferring into the United

Church, and trusted God. I had no idea where the money would come from, how I was going to cope, and what it would all look like in the end. Now, this is not the end of the book, but rather the end of a chapter – and this is what it looks like. Now I understand. Faith has brought understanding. In it all the risen, living Spirit of Jesus has led, supported and encouraged me all the way. Do you think / believe in an empty tomb?

The old gospel song answers that question beautifully: “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.” I’ve asked Catherine if we could do a “Cat and Doug” number one more time. Listen, ... read the message:

I serve a risen Saviour,
He's in the world today;
I know that He is living,
Whatever men may say;
I see His hand of mercy,
I hear His voice of cheer,
And just the time I need Him
He's always near.

In all the world around me
I see His loving care,
And tho my heart grows weary
I never will despair;
I know that He is leading
Thro' all the stormy blast,
The day of His appearing
Will come at last.

Chorus:

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives
today!
He walks with me and He talks with me
Along life's narrow way.
He lives, He live, salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives:
He lives within my heart.

Rejoice, rejoice, O Christian,
Lift up your voice and sing

Eternal hallelujahs
To Jesus Christ the King!
The hope of all who seek Him,
The help of all who find,
None other is so loving,
So good and kind.

Chorus:

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives
today!
He walks with me and He talks with me
Along life's narrow way.
He lives, He live, salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives:
He lives within my heart.^{vi}

I am so thankful that the risen, living Jesus Christ is here with us this morning. The undeniable proof of His resurrection is right here, right now. I am grateful beyond words that He has led me to this point in our lives, able to say with absolute certainty that “because He lives, we can face tomorrow”. You – collectively and individually – and me. We all can say, “... and life is worth the living, just because He lives.”

I also want to thank each one of you for the privilege of working alongside you as we do our part to let everyone know that God loves us all, every one of us, and because of that love, we in turn are free to love all. It’s been a great nine years. Amen!!

ENDNOTES

ⁱ The New York Times, article by Laurie Goodstein, Feb. 27, 2007

ⁱⁱⁱ Used with permission

ⁱⁱⁱ Used with permission

^{iv} Kenneth Samples, 4/1/2001 Augustine of Hippo (Part 2 of 2): Rightly Dividing the Truth

^v Augustine of Hippo (Ep. CXXXVII)

^{vi} Lyrics and Music: Alfred H. Ackley 1887-1960