

DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

Last Sunday was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for many of us who were able to join with the Ray C. Stedman family to celebrate in his memorial services. Those services reflected our love for our Lord Jesus Christ and our thankfulness to him for allowing Ray to live in our generation with his wonderful and faithful wife Elaine, his four daughters and their families. Many of the men and women attending those services publicly acknowledged that they were part of the Stedmans' extended spiritual family and that Ray and Elaine were either their spiritual parents, friends, teachers or mentors. As we listened to the many voices thanking God for Ray's life and ministry we repeatedly heard the same theme: he sought to live out his life before his ever present but invisible risen Lord and by his resurrection power. And then he sought to encourage any who were willing to listen to do the same thing. The last days of his physical life on earth were lived by faith in the promise as spoken by Peter, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1 Peter 1:3) Ray is now in the eternal presence of the One whom he loved and chose to serve with his whole heart.

But we are left here, still on earth. And the question we need to ask ourselves is, "Do we believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ?" The answer will determine how we live our earthly lives and where we will spend our lives in eternity. With that in mind, let's look at Luke 23:50-24:12 to see what evidence we find for the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave.

Jesus buried in a borrowed grave Luke 23:50-53

And behold, a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man (he had not consented to their plan and action), a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God; this man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. And he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had ever lain.

What we now call Good Friday was a dark, fearful, and strange day for the disciples of Jesus Christ, as well as the people of Jerusalem, as they stood around the cross upon which Jesus was crucified. The heavens were dark at noon, a major earthquake followed, and the curtain that hung in the temple between the holy place and the holy of holies was torn in half. The earthquake opened the graves of recently buried saints, and they walked around Jerusalem as a witness of the resurrection to come for all believers. Fifty days later on the feast of Pentecost, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, would summarize that dark Friday when he stated to the people within the temple area, "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know-this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." (Acts 2:22-23)

The burial of Jesus was most unusual in the context of those days. Roman funeral ceremonies were dignified but simple among both the rich and the poor. After a corpse was washed and anointed, it lay-in-state for a few days and then was cremated. However, when criminals were crucified, they were left on the cross as a warning to any who might be planning an assault against the state. Once their flesh was picked off by the birds, their bones were taken down and handed over to the family for burial. An exception would be on the eve of festive occasions, when the family could ask for the body of the one crucified so it could be buried. In the case of Jesus, not only were the Romans involved but also the Jews, who wanted to have the body of Jesus

buried before Sabbath began that evening because of the Law as stated in Deuteronomy 21:22-23, "And if a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance." (One of the reasons the Jews have a theological problem with acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah was because they believed he was cursed by God once he was placed on the cross. The Christian answer is found in Galatians 3:13-14 which states that Jesus became a curse for us.)

If we look at the parallel accounts of the gospels (Matthew 27:57f; Mark 15:43f; John 19:38f), we are introduced to a wonderful man named Joseph of Arimathea. He was a rich man and a prominent member of the Jewish supreme court. We also know him to be a righteous man who was waiting for the kingdom of God and who, in time, became a secret disciple of Jesus. Apparently, during the trial Joseph did not agree with his fellow rulers concerning their plan to crucify the Lord, and finally, after our Lord's death he decided to come out in the open and declare himself a follower of Christ. This bold step of courage came when he went before Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate, surprised that Jesus was already dead, had a centurion check out Joseph's report, and when it was confirmed he released the body to him (probably because he never believed Jesus was a criminal). This disciple was joined by a fellow Pharisee named Nicodemus (John 3) who apparently also had come out in the open as a disciple of Jesus. He was willing to help Joseph bury our Lord and had brought about a hundred pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes with which to anoint the body. This was to counter the stench of decomposition which occurs quickly in a warm climate. After wrapping Jesus' body in a linen cloth, they took him into a nearby garden, laid him in a new tomb cut into the rock and "rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away." (Matthew 27:60) The prophecy of Isaiah 53:9 was fulfilled to the letter: "His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death."

Those of you who have had the privilege of visiting Jerusalem probably were taken to a place called the Garden Tomb, discovered by Sir Gordon in the nineteenth century. Ray Stedman and I visited that Garden Tomb in 1972, and there I told him the story of my first visit some seventeen years earlier. It was October of 1955 and I was a young Air Force corporal on leave in Jerusalem. One cold morning, as I walked alone along the small side streets just outside the Old City walls, I saw a door marked "The Garden Tomb." I rang the bell, and an Arab gardener opened the door and invited me in. When I asked him about the history of the garden, he told me that this was the place where many scholars thought Jesus could have been buried. It was close to the hill of Calvary and several tombs had been found carved in the side of the cliff which matched the description in the Scriptures. As I walked alone around that empty garden my mind went back over all the stories that I had heard about Jesus, the cross, his burial and resurrection. Finally, as I came up to the cave I realized that as a nonbeliever my life was spiritually bankrupt. Stooping down, I entered that tomb dead in my trespasses and sins. After sitting on the cold stone flooring for about half an hour, I stood up and turned towards the small opening prepared to stoop again in order to get out of the grave. But before I did I saw a small sign on the cave wall that said, "He is not here for He has risen." And I agreed, for during that half hour I had invited the risen Jesus into my heart as my personal Lord and Savior.

It would be very difficult to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ if you were the disciples who physically took his beaten and bruised body down from the cross and wrapped that lifeless corpse in a burial linen. It would be difficult to believe as you carried that body to a graveyard and placed it in a new tomb. Eventually, they would believe that Jesus rose from the dead, but first, others would confirm the empty tomb.

The women confirmed the tomb was empty

Luke 23:54-24:1-3

And it was the preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. Now the women who had come with Him out of Galilee followed after, and saw the tomb and how His body was laid. And they returned and prepared spices and perfumes.

And on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

Because the Sabbath was about to begin that Friday at sunset, the women who had followed after Joseph and Nicodemus to the tomb could not do anything more. So they left to prepare spices and perfumes in order to return after Sabbath to anoint the body of Jesus.

Matthew 27:62-66 points out that the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate on Saturday and reminded him that Jesus, the "deceiver," had said, "After three days I am to rise again." They told Pilate to "...therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, lest the disciples come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first." Pilate gave them permission to send their guards and seal the stone that was covering the tomb where Jesus lay.

These two days had to be the longest days in the disciples' lives—days of fear, pain, and despair. All their hopes, dreams, and promises were scattered to the wind.

On Sunday, at early dawn, the women came to the tomb, hearts heavy with grief and sorrow, bringing the spices which they had prepared. They had followed Jesus, cared about him, and even contributed to the financial support of Jesus and his disciples. Yet, despite these relationships with Jesus, and knowing all that the prophets told of the Messiah's life, death and resurrection, as well as all the times Jesus told them about his death and resurrection, they were not acting in accordance with this knowledge. This was clearly illustrated a few weeks before the cross when our Lord's best friend Lazarus died. Jesus met Martha, his sister, on the way to the tomb and encouraged her with the words "Your brother shall rise again." When she replied, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day," Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die." (John 11:25-26) Martha knew about the resurrection at the end of time, but she had not grasped the reality that Jesus would be raised on the third day. It had not penetrated her understanding.

It was the same with these women who were on their way to the tomb. Resurrection was far from their thoughts. Their concern was over who would roll away the stone for them from the entrance of the tomb. At that time they could not know that the graveyard where the body of Jesus lay had been affected by a second severe earthquake, "for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his garment as white as snow." (Matthew 28:2,3) As they came into the graveyard in the breaking light and walked toward the cave, they could see that the stone had already been rolled away. And when they entered the tomb, they did not find the body of Jesus. The stone was not removed for the Lord to get out of the tomb, but for the women and the disciples to look in and see that he was risen.

The empty tomb of Jesus has created great conflict in the hearts of men and women in every generation. They don't mind hearing the stories of Jesus' life, ministry, death and burial, because they satisfy a need for some religious tradition in their lives. These stories also do not challenge their philosophy of life in which they believe they are "the captains of their own lives" and accountable to no one but themselves. But the story that does challenge them is the one about the resurrection of Jesus. For if he has been raised from the dead, then that makes him the Son of God, the resurrection and the life, mankind's only Savior, the King of kings and their final Judge to whom they are accountable for their lives on this earth.

Not only does the world want to eliminate the possibility that Jesus has risen from the grave, but many within the church struggle with this foundation stone of the Christian faith. Some twenty years ago Ray Stedman and I took a long walk on a warm fall day in Canton, Ohio. We found ourselves in a section of that town where the trees were displaying their wonderful fall colors and strolled past many churches. As we walked by one small church Ray stopped and looked at it for a few moments and then said, "You know, Ron, this town is filled with churches. In fact, there is almost one on every street corner. And yet most of these congregations struggle with the reality that Jesus has risen from the grave and now lives in their hearts, and wants to release his "resurrection power" within them and then through them to all they come in contact with each day to his glory

and their spiritual healing and joy." Here were churches, closed except on Sunday, whose people did not seem to realize that day by day, by living in the power of the resurrection, God could use them to change the community in which they lived.

The women who had believed that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah, could not understand that he had risen from the grave on the third day as he said he would. These women, at that moment, reflected the hearts of the great majority of Christians today who are also living as if Jesus had never been raised from dead by his Father. And yet, as written in a hymn by Alfred Ackley in 1933, the key message of Christianity is:

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

So, not only did the women finally confirm the empty grave, but...

The angels confirmed the tomb was empty

Luke 24:4-8

And it happened that while they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling apparel; and as the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." And they remembered His words...

This was the second time angels brought good news about Jesus. At his birth angels appeared to shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem and said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11) Now, at his resurrection, the angels show up again and ask the women, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead?" Why do you seek the one who said he was "the resurrection and the life" in a graveyard? This was not a spiritual resurrection, but a bodily resurrection. It was not the spirit of Christ which came out of the tomb, it was the body of Christ. At the time of the death of her brother Lazarus, Martha had told Jesus that she believed in the resurrection on the last day. Believing in the resurrection was not difficult for the Jews to understand, but being raised on the third day was. Jesus had told his disciples earlier, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again." (Luke 18:31-34) At that time the disciples did not understand what he was saying for it was hidden from them. But on that final Passover God's plan of redemption was accomplished; followed by the burial of his Son, who experienced the wages of sin which is death; followed the bodily resurrection from the dead as the prophets foretold in the Scriptures.

Some two months before Ray passed from this life into eternity he came down to Stanford Hospital for a checkup. Calling together the elders from PBC Cupertino and PBC North, we met with him in the Fireside Room for prayer and encouragement. As we sat in a circle I do not believe any of us will ever forget his words to us. He told us he had cancer and that it was inoperable. But he also said he was not afraid to die and that he was willing to "drink the cup" the Lord had handed him. At the same time, he was willing to have the elders anoint him with oil and pray for his recovery. But the bottom line was not his will but that the will of the Lord be done. It was a very moving and amazing hour as we sat with a brother who believed with his whole heart, soul, mind and strength that Jesus had risen from the grave, and because of that resurrection and the fact that he had placed his faith in Jesus as his Lord, he also would be raised from the grave and live to serve Jesus forever in eternity.

So the women and the angels confirmed that the tomb was empty and then....

The disciples confirm the tomb was empty

Luke 24:9-12

...and returned from the tomb and reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now they were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them were telling these things to the apostles. And these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them. [But Peter arose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings only; and he went away to his home, marveling at that which had happened.]

The women, excited after having had this incredible experience, and though they had not seen Jesus yet, by faith ran to the disciples to tell them Jesus had risen from the dead. When they arrived at the place where the disciples were staying they found Peter filled with remorse, Thomas' mind filled with doubts, John's heart filled with grief, and the rest of the men and women struggling with doubts and fear. The group was leaderless, their hopes shattered, their future gone. Not one among the many hiding behind locked doors believed that Jesus had risen from the dead though they had been told over and over again by the Master himself that "...just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the seamonster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:40) The words of the women appeared to them as nonsense but Peter arose and ran to the tomb to look for himself. There he saw only the linen wrapping and went away to his home marveling. Over the next forty days the Lord Jesus would appear to all the disciples, and finally they would believe that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah, and the resurrection and the life.

Today, people in the world still think that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is nonsense and continue to live in their sin of unbelief. This is in spite of the fact that: (1) The women confirmed that the tomb was empty-telling the disciples the good news, "He is Alive!" (2) The angels confirmed that the tomb was empty-telling the women the good news, "He is Alive!" and (3) the disciples confirmed that the tomb was empty-telling the world in time the good news, "He is Alive!"

Paul wrote twenty years later to the new Christians in Corinth, Greece about the absolute certainty of the resurrection of Jesus Christ: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time...then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also." (1 Corinthians 15:3-8) Paul continues, "...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins....If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:17, 19-22)

Some thirty years after he saw the empty tomb, Peter wrote, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1 Peter 1:3) A few months after the resurrection Peter and John stood before the Jewish supreme court on charges of healing a lame man. The judges wanted to know by what power, or in what name, they had healed the man. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter answered, "...by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead...And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:10,12) He recognized and testified that it was not by his power this man was healed, but that the resurrected Christ was working in him and through him. And Christ is the only one who can heal any of us. The word for saved is the same as the word for healed. This man was healed physically to show that you can be healed spiritually.

Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead? The angels did, the women did, and the disciples finally did. Every Christian down through the centuries has believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, for his resurrection is our only hope for eternal life, now and in the life to come.

The afternoon memorial service for Ray C. Stedman closed with a moment of silence. Then quietly but clearly we all heard the first haunting notes of *Amazing Grace* from a lone Scottish bagpipe. We turned toward the back of the room and watched spellbound as a tall Scotsman in a full Scots plaid uniform marched slowly down the aisle as each note fell distinctly on our ears and into our hearts. The fourth verse of *Amazing Grace* reads:

"Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hast brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home."

Ray had lived his whole life and now it was time to go home. And he trusted in the grace of God while he was living, while he was dying, and when he arrived in eternity. He lived it out. There was a richness in his life because he lived in the belief that Jesus Christ rose again from the dead. But it wasn't like a belief in fable or myth. It was a belief based on evidence that had been presented. Ray's work on earth is done, but I can still hear him reading the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:6-9: "...being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him." Ray has experienced his own personal resurrection into the very presence of God because he had placed his faith in Jesus who is the resurrection and the life.

In whom have you placed your faith for this life and the life to come? My prayer is that you have placed your faith in Jesus, the risen and reigning Son of God, and the only one in the universe who can offer you and me eternal life.

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