

CAN WE BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION?

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Text: 1 Cor. 15:3-8

INTRODUCTION: Today is a special day in Christianity - it is the day during which we commemorate an event that gives meaning to the Christian faith. We have gathered here today because we believe that almost 2,000 years ago a young Galilean Jew in His early 30s was executed in Jerusalem during the Roman administration of Pontius Pilate, the procurator of Judea; that this Jew was buried in a newly-cut tomb of Joseph of Arimathea; that his name was Jesus and he was from Nazareth and that He was raised from the dead. We also believe that He lived on this earth for a brief period before ascending to be with God the Father; and that even now He lives!

Question: Why do we believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead - and for that matter the possibility of our own resurrections?

A. None of us were there. None of us saw the stone as it was rolled away. None of us saw Jesus come forth from the tomb.

B. We have no snapshots, no digital pictures, no color slides, no home movies, no video phone recordings, no visual evidence whatsoever.

C. We believe because a small group of followers called disciples of Jesus believed that He rose from the tomb! We believe because they were convinced that He was raised from the dead. We believe because through their witness, which has continued for almost 2 millennia in countless and unnamable followers, the story of the resurrection of Jesus has been passed on again and again. We too have been included in the long, long list of followers who believe in the resurrected Jesus!

D. Furthermore, the witness and testimony of these disciples has been preserved for us in the New Testament. We believe because we accept the truth of this written testimony!

I. How did the early disciples believe in the resurrection: This question is both important and instructive for those of us in the 21st century because the answer provides direction for our contemporary witness and testimony to the resurrected Jesus? If we can understand how they believed, then we can apply that understanding to our task in our world.

A. **The first disciples of Jesus believed with their heads** that Jesus rose from the grave. They believed with their intellect, with their minds. For them, the facts were available. Jesus, who they had seen arrested, tried, executed and buried, was now alive! He walked with them, fellowshiped with them, ate with them, and taught them.

1) Thomas is the best example of one who sought and found evidence. We call him "Doubting Thomas." Maybe "Questioning Thomas" would be a better description. The story is found in John 20:24-29. Thomas seems to be taking a scientific approach. He seems to be saying, "If Jesus is alive, then prove it!" I won't believe until I see for myself. I want evidence. I want to see the nail prints in His hands. I want to put my hand in his side and feel the wound." I want some proof! And he got it! Eight days later Jesus appeared. We are not told if Thomas actually put his hands in the wounds. He didn't need to.

2) In 1 Cor. 15, the first Biblical testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, Paul argued logically and effectively to convince his readers that Jesus had been resurrected. His is a theological or philosophical approach. He gives evidence of over 500 who had witnessed the resurrected Christ, including his own experience on the road to Damascus. He then argued that there were those who said that there was no resurrection, and concluded that if that is the case, then Jesus had not been raised. And, if he had not been raised, then the preaching of the church and his preaching was in vain, that the faith of the believers was worthless, that Christians were false witnesses, and that they were to be

pitied. But, he concludes, Jesus has been raised from the dead, that he was the first fruits of the resurrected life, and that the hope for our resurrection depended upon the validity of the resurrection of Jesus.

B. The early disciples also believed with their hearts that Jesus rose from the dead. They had a passion that went beyond simple intellectual assent. They moved from sorrow to joy, they believed emotionally that Jesus was alive!

- 1) The two Mary of Matt. 28 upon seeing the stone rolled away and the empty tomb and upon being told that Jesus had risen, were filled with two basic emotions - fear and joy. Rational argument was not their response. Mark tells us that they trembled, that they were astonished, that they were afraid.
- 2) In Luke, Peter upon hearing the report of the women, raced to the tomb and marveled at its emptiness.
- 3) The two disciples, one Cleophas, were returning home from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were sorrowful; their hopes were crushed. They had heard of the empty tomb but were still sad. Later, they would relate how their hearts burned as Jesus appeared to them and explained the Scriptures. They were so excited upon discovering the identity of Jesus that they returned immediately to Jerusalem to tell the apostles.
- 4) Luke also tells us that back in Jerusalem as the two disciples from Emmaus spoke that Jesus appeared to the apostles. It was so marvelous and so joyful that they could scarcely believe it!

C. The early followers also believed in the resurrection in the history of their lives. They launched forth, proclaiming their message with courage and conviction in the face of ridicule, persecutions, and innumerable obstacles. They changed the history of Western civilization!

- 1) The only way that you can explain the complete turnabout in the lives of the scared, scattered disciples who suddenly became bold at Pentecost and afterwards is that they truly believed in the resurrection of Jesus.
- 2) Paul's life changed from persecutor to missionary because he was convinced that the resurrected Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus.
- 3) The history of these believers changed the history of the world. They believed in the resurrection through the way that they lived their lives!

II. How can we believe in the resurrection two millennia later? How can we believe as the disciples did in the resurrection of Jesus? We can believe with our heads, our hearts, and our history.

A. We can believe with our heads, with our intellect.

- 1) We were not there, but Paul tells us that there were more than 500 witnesses who saw Jesus, plus Peter, James, all of the apostles, and himself. The Gospels add to the list. The testimony of so many is sufficient to convince me of the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. If you were in a court of law, and over 500 people testified on your behalf, the chances are very good that you would make your case.
- 2) Even the enemies acknowledged that the tomb was empty. We are told that they bribed the guards in order to distort the evidence.
- 3) The changed lives of the disciples provide for me the most rationale argument to support the case for the resurrection. How do you explain the changes otherwise? We can believe with our heads because convincing evidence is available.

B. We can also believe with our hearts, with our emotions, with our passion. As the Spirit convinces us of the truth of the gospel and the resurrection, we should respond with joy and excitement and amazement!

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- 1) If Jesus rose from the grave and lives, how can we avoid an emotional surge and continued excitement? I don't like artificial emotion. But the news that Jesus is not dead and buried, but alive, should be the cause for joy, for burning anticipation of what can be, for enthusiasm at the prospect of our own resurrection.
- 2) Furthermore, we ought to convince others of this truth, if by nothing else than our passion to a cause whose validity rests on whether or not Jesus rose from the grave.

C. Above all, we must express our belief in the resurrection through the history of our lives.

We must go beyond cold, orthodox theological statements and beyond the excitement of emotional commitment toward becoming aggressive, bold witnesses to a resurrected, living Christ who makes an absolute difference in peoples' lives.

- 1) That we give meaning to our minds and emotions by our ministry is essential. Paul said that he was a debtor to all men. So are we. We pay that debt to God as we minister. We are obligated to live, to serve, to give witness to God, who made Himself known in Jesus.
- 2) Does your life reflect belief in the resurrected and living Lord?

CONCLUSIONS: After the ascension of Jesus, the disciples were asked, "Why are you standing here looking up into the sky?" They were told to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth!

- 1) They were told to get to work, to live consistently with that which they knew in their heads and their hearts.
- 2) As we come together today, we are saying that we believe in the resurrection. May we grow in that belief - in our heads, in our hearts, and above all in our history as we live, care, and minister as believers in the living Lord, Jesus the Christ and the Savior of the World!