

Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006, Liturgical Year “B”

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

“The F-E-A-T of Jesus”

SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE

The year was 1965. The book was *“The Passover Plot.”* Written by Hugh Schonfield, it was a top best-seller. In his book, Schonfield contended that Jesus not only deliberately conspired to be crucified, but faked his death and resurrection as well. While on the cross, instead of getting the traditional vinegar, his disciples give him a drug potion that rendered him unconscious. Afterwards, Jesus was taken down from the cross in a deathlike trance, and then removed to the tomb where he was nursed back to health, only to then be “resurrected.”

At the time, this new interpretation found wide acceptance around the world. Many hailed it as possibly the most important book published in a decade. *Time* magazine wrote, *“Schonfield does not discredit Christ. Instead, he argues that Christ was indeed the Messiah – the Son of Man, as he thought of himself, but not the Son of God.”* Even the renowned Bible Scholar, William Barclay called *“the Passover Plot”* a book of enormous learning and erudition, meticulously documented.

Now let’s fast-forward forty years. Another book, this time *“The DaVinci Code”* by author Dan Brown, is making headlines as a runaway best-seller with over 40 million copies sold. A movie based on the book will be coming out next month. The story line? Jesus actually was married to Mary Magdalene, they had a child whose descendants still walk the earth today, and the Church has tried to cover up the fact ever since. Though author Dan Brown has stated that the many events described in the book are fictional, he still believes that they are based on historical fact. What does he use as a basis for his presuppositions? The *Gospel of Mary* which portrays Mary Magdalene as the favorite disciple of Jesus though it never says the two were married. Of course, should we be surprised that Dan Brown believes such things? A multi-million dollar book contract would make believers out of most people.

And then two weeks ago the ancient work, the *Gospel of Judas*, was released to the public. It states that Judas was really Jesus’ favorite, and that Jesus asked him to betray Him.

WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP?

So will the real Jesus please stand up? Who is the real Jesus? Did He conspire to be crucified only to fake His death? Was He really married to Mary Magdalene? Was Judas really His closest friend? Do you know who the real Jesus is? Could you give a defense for who the real Jesus is? Does it even matter?

Well, as I said in last year’s Easter Sermon, there is only one sure thing in life: we will all stand before the Lord Jesus Christ to give an account for how we lived our lives (**Rom. 14:9-12**). If that’s the case then we better know who Jesus is. Especially considering that we are blessed to be in a nation where we have incredible freedom and access to spiritual truth.

Now if there is one thing that separates Jesus from everyone else, it is the resurrection. Jesus is the only Person who not only said He was going to die and rise again, but actually did so by virtue of His own power. Of all the world religions and philosophies in our world, no other world religion claims that its founder died and rose again. NONE. Abraham, Buddha, Mohammed all are acknowledged by their followers to have died and been buried. Jesus Christ is the only one who rose again. In fact, when it comes to our faith, when it comes to everything we believe in this Bible, it stands or falls with the resurrection. There would be no Christianity and no Church unless Jesus had risen from the dead. We wouldn’t even be here this morning. That’s why St. Paul said **I Cor. 15:14-16, 19**, *“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God...if only in this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”* Moreover, if Jesus did not rise again, then He is a liar, a phony, and a fake.

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The truth is Jesus did rise again, and we need to know why so that we can refute garbage like modern books such as *“The Passover Plot”* and *“The DaVinci Code”* or ancient false gospels like the *“Gospel of Mary”* and the *“Gospel of Judas.”* We need to be able to give a defense for the hope that is within us. Because the sad fact of the matter is that many people believe or are sympathetic to such nonsense. Many are led astray because they simply don’t do their homework.

THE NEW TESTAMENT GOSPELS ARE TRUSTWORTHY

Now the first thing we need to understand is that the New Testament Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - are considered to be primary historical documents. They are not books of legends or myths but of actual persons, places and events written within a generation of Jesus’ death. Archaeology and other non-biblical documents such as Jewish and Roman writings and letters help confirm the historicity of much of what’s in the Gospels. Moreover, the Gospels were either written by those who knew Jesus personally or composed of accounts taken from eyewitnesses. They were recognized by early Christians for their clarity and authority pertaining to matters of faith and spiritual truth. In fact, the Gospels themselves declare that what they are saying is true. Luke, the physician, begins his Gospel by saying that he writes so that the reader may know the *“exact truth”* concerning the things about Jesus and the early Church (Lk. 1:1-4). The apostle John writes at the conclusion of his gospel that he is the disciple who has written these things and that *“his testimony is true”* (Jn. 21:24).

And yet, there are many in our world who assume that the Gospels can’t be taken literally, that they are just stories. Like the remarks made by Bill O’ Reilly on last Thursday night’s show *“The O’Reilly Factor.”* He was interviewing a Roman Catholic priest on the validity of the *Gospel of Judas*, when he made the comment that “You can’t take the Gospels as history – for they contradict each other – one has Jesus feeding the 8000 and another Jesus feeding a different number, one Nicodemus is sitting on the roof, and another he is in a tree, etc.” I thought to myself, has this guy ever read the Bible? Jesus feeding the 5000 is recorded in all four Gospels and His other miracle of feeding 4000 is in Matthew and Mark. Nicodemus was never in a tree or on a roof. It was Zacchaeus who was in the tree. That’s the problem with many in our world, they have never read or really studied the Bible, and then many who have, take the Bible out of context and miss the whole point.

The truth is the Gospels don’t contradict each other. They may include different details of the same events but they do not contradict. Now there were other so-called Gospels like the ones mentioned earlier, but these contained outlandish and silly stories, accounts that blatantly contradicted Jesus’ teachings and often were the creations of Gnostic believers who thought that matter was evil and that salvation was attained by secret knowledge. The Gnostics and their writings also taught that Jesus really didn’t die on the cross. Do you see the connection? Nothing really has changed. The same old heresies rear their ugly heads.

The truth is that we can be confident that the Bibles we have today in the pews reflect 99.9% of what was originally written by the New Testament writers. Why can we have such confidence? Unlike the *Gospel of Judas*, for example, of which there is only one known manuscript dated about 300 AD, we have thousands of ancient manuscripts of the Gospels that we can compare and contrast, enabling us to have in our hands something that is virtually identical to the original. And in any good translation, the variations and differences are noted in the marginal notes on each page. *** **Beginning in May, I will be doing a sermon series on *“Is the Bible Really the Word of God?”* We will see why the Bible is the most verifiable document in the ancient world. But you need to come to church to hear it.**

So what do the Gospels reveal concerning Jesus Christ and His Resurrection? We learn four key truths. You can remember them by learning the acronym **F-E-A-T**.

FATAL TORMENT

“F” stands for “Fatal Torment.” Not only was there a man named Jesus who really lived, but He died, and not in an ordinary way. Jesus was crucified. Death by crucifixion is thought to have originated with the Persians. Alexander the Great used it and the Romans perfected it. It was a cruel and horrible way to die. Often the victim would be whipped and

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beaten, then forced to carry a wooden crossbeam 75 pounds in weight to his place of execution, then bound or nailed to the beams, only to die of asphyxiation as the lungs would fill with fluid.

The historical record is clear. Jesus died by this method of execution. And there is no conceivable way He could have survived. Back in 1986, *The Journal of the American Medical Association* had an excellent article on Christ's crucifixion highlighting not only the terrible trauma and duress this method placed on an individual, but that after six trials, no sleep, several beatings, a terrible scourging, and then having to carry the top wooden beam of the cross, being nailed to a cross and finally speared in His side, there is no way Jesus could have survived. Some may say well He could have since He was God. Yes, He could have, but He didn't. Those closest to Him knew He died. Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, knew that He died. The Jewish leaders all knew that He died. Except for members of religious cults who came up with outlandish theories decades later, Moslems who believe that God substituted someone else in Jesus' place, and authors who want to make a quick buck, the evidence is clear: Jesus suffered fatal torment by crucifixion and He died.

EMPTY TOMB

That leads us to the second key truth – represented by the letter “E” - the “Empty Tomb.” Yes, Jesus suffered “Fatal Torment.” He died, and then was buried in a tomb. All four gospels tell of Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy Jew, providing a tomb for Jesus' body. But then else something happened. The body disappeared.

The Jewish leaders had asked Pilate to provide a number of Roman soldiers to guard the tomb to prevent Jesus' body from being stolen. Why did they do this? Because they remembered that Jesus said He would rise again. They knew that if the disciples were able to steal the body they could tell others this lie.

But seriously, what was the condition of the disciples? They had all forsaken Jesus and fled. They were exhausted, dejected, and feared for their lives. They were in no condition or mood to steal a dead body. But even if a couple of them had enough gumption to do it, how would they prevail against well-trained Roman soldiers and then move a 2000 pound stone? And yet, when Jesus' body disappeared, that's what many believed happened then, and today many still believe that's what really happened. Regardless of how the tomb became empty, history is clear: there was and still is no body to be found. There is still an empty tomb. That alone does not mean that Jesus rose again, but it does set the stage for the next truth, represented by letter “A” – Appearances.

APPEARANCES

The Gospel accounts, and I might add, Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, all report the same thing: many different people saw Jesus alive after He died and was buried. In fact, in one of the earliest books of the New Testament, dated in the early 50's AD (only 20 years after Jesus died), the Apostle Paul states that as many as 500 people saw Jesus at one time after He had risen from the dead.

Now I know what some in our world say, “People either made it up (they really didn't see anyone) but said they did, or they were seeing a hallucination.” If they made it up then all of the apostles, men like Peter, James and John, the Apostle Paul, as wells as disciples like Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary and Martha, and a whole host of other followers of Christ are liars, something that the Scriptural witness does not reflect whatsoever. The whole message of the New Testament is about knowing the truth, believing the truth, standing for the truth, and telling the truth. Something that is also important to note is this: who were the first people to witness the empty tomb and see Jesus? Women. In the ancient world, women did not have the same legal standing as did men. In fact, their testimony was not even allowed in a court of law. So if the Apostles were making this stuff up, they wouldn't have reported that women were the first to witness the empty tomb and see Jesus.

But maybe they weren't lying, maybe they were just delusional? And yet, there is no evidence of delusion here, and I will tell you why. Jesus said, **“You will know a person by their fruit.”** In other words, we can tell the validity of a person's character by how they live their lives and what is produced in their lives. What did the disciples produce? What resulted from their so-called hallucinations? This leads us to the final truth, represented by the letter “T.”

TRANSFORMATION

They were transformed. Their lives were changed forever. Once a band of dejected and fearful followers, the disciples suddenly changed into men and women full of joy, excitement, and purpose. They now had a mission. They now knew the Truth. They were free from fear, anxiety, worry, the unknown and death. Why? They saw the Risen Lord. Not a ghost or apparition, but the very same Jesus they had walked and talked with, the very same Jesus they had supper with the night before He died.

Hallucinations can't explain the behavior of the disciples. They weren't druggies, mentally challenged, or had personality disorders. They were normal people like you and me, but they were changed but knowing the Risen Christ. They went about proclaiming the good news of Jesus and the Kingdom of God. As a result of their example, hundreds of thousands believed, many were healed, and all had their lives turned right side up. Moreover, they were willing to die for what they believed as well. As has been well said, “they faced the tyrants brandished steel, the lions gory mane, and the fires of a thousands death” because they were utterly convinced that not only did Jesus rise from the grave but that they too, would rise again.

Also, we need to ask, why did this new group of Jews and then Gentiles become the Church? Why did this new group, though persecuted by not only their fellow Jewish countrymen, but by the Roman authorities as well, continue to flourish? Why does the Church today continue to grow and now is

in virtually every nation of the world? Why were the first Jewish believers willing to change the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday unless something incredible happened on that day? How could they celebrate with bread and wine the broken body of Jesus unless they knew the resurrection was true?

Why does Jesus continue to change lives? Seriously. Because of a made-up story? Because of a hallucination? Because we want to feel good about ourselves? I don't think so. The answer is that Jesus is alive, He still works today and He is coming back. Our God is a living God. He is a God of miracles and He has given us so much evidence of His incredible love and power that all you have to do is seek Him out and you will find Him. Jesus said, ***“Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you.”*** AND ***“You shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall set you free.”***

DO YOU KNOW JESUS CHRIST AS YOUR LORD?

We have looked at the evidence, but it is not enough to know Christ evidentially, you need to know Him experientially as well. You need to know Him personally. So I ask you today, have you entrusted your life to Jesus Christ? Have you accepted Him as your Lord and Savior? Are you living for Him?

Make no mistake, the only hope we have in this life is found in the One who came to earth 2000 years ago. Jesus said, ***“Unless you are born again, you can not enter the Kingdom of God.”*** Those aren't optional words. They are words of ultimate reality and they are words of truth.

How can you be born again? Simply by putting your trust in Christ, recognizing that your sin put Him on the cross, thanking Him for what He has done and then committing to follow Him the rest of your life. You know, it's easy to say a prayer and say “yes” on Easter Sunday. But the only way you'll know if you're really born again is if you are willing to put your faith into action. The only way you'll know you really have it, is what you'll be doing today, tomorrow and next Sunday.

Life is not meant just to be lived out. Life is about living for the One who is the Author of life, the One who has conquered the grave, the One who has paved the way for life eternal. Our God has left us an incredible historical record, but more importantly He has given us an incredible living promise. **Jesus said, “For God so love the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him, should not perish, but shall have eternal life.” (Jn. 3:16).**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!