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Church

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*I Believe in the Resurrection*

1 Corinthians 15:1–8

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series: The Apostles' Creed

The one thing that people stumble over most in regards to the Christian faith is the suggestion that Jesus actually rose from the grave. They look at it as I once did, that at first whiff it smells like all the myths and folklore surrounding Santa Claus. It may be fun to pretend. It may lend a little more color and pizzazz to life. But no one in their right mind would ever dream of taking it seriously. I can remember thinking that, although Christians preach about some really noble concepts, in the final analysis, Christianity itself remains a mere pipe dream with no basis in fact—just wishful thinking for weak-willed men and women who need something to cling to. Besides, what difference would it possibly make to my daily life and attitudes whether or not Jesus rose from the dead?

I'm sure that all of you here today have heard or had similar thoughts at one time or another. Thank God that in our search for truth there is a place for doubt, even in the Christian faith. That's such a relieving affirmation for me. But was the resurrection fact or fiction? That's the question we'll be considering today. Did Jesus really rise up in bodily form or is this story, as Karl Marx suggests, just another religious theory offered up as an opiate to the masses?

What if we could ask that question to the most successful trial attorney in the entire world? I'm not talking about F. Lee Bailey or Johnny Cochran. The *Guinness Book of World Records* states that an Englishman by the name of Sir Lionel Luckhoo is, by far, the most successful lawyer in history. Sir Lionel won 245 consecutive murder trials before he died in 1997 at the age of 83. This is an incredible feat that no one has come close to duplicating. Can you imagine—245 acquittals without a hitch? Obviously, he was a brilliant litigator with sharp analytical tools. No doubt he understood well what constitutes reliable, admissible and persuasive evidence. Wouldn't it be great if we could get an informed opinion on the bodily resurrection of Jesus from a legal expert like him? The good news is that we can. During his own well-documented spiritual journey, Luckhoo examined the resurrection to see if it stood the test of legal evidence. This was his conclusion: "I say unequivocally that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof that leaves absolutely no room for doubt." Luckhoo wasn't talking about a mythical resurrection, but a very real and physical one.

Now, unless you are in the habit of watching movies like *Night of the Living Dead* on Pay-per-view our experience tells us that dead people just don't come back to life. But here we have the most successful trial attorney in history concluding that the resurrection happened just as the New Testament says it did. So convinced was he that Luckhoo did the most logical thing: he placed his faith in the gospel message. He figured that if Christ had really conquered death, then He alone provided hope beyond the grave. He rightly saw that the Christian faith stands or falls on the reality of the resurrection; that without it our faith is vain and worthless. So we are going to examine the evidence that convinced Sir Lionel Luckhoo that the resurrection was real and not a myth. Basically, it boils down to three things: the empty tomb, the eyewitness testimony and the explosive change in the lives of the disciples.

**Now brothers I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me (1 Cor. 15:1–8).**

### **The Empty Tomb**

First of all there was the empty tomb. The gospels tell us that the body of Jesus was wrapped in about 100 lbs. of spices and then laid to rest in the tomb of a wealthy Jewish leader named Joseph. The tomb was sealed with an enormous boulder being rolled in front of it. An elite Roman guard was then set up to keep point, to make sure that nobody messed with the body. And yet, we are also told that on Sunday morning several women, and later a couple of disciples came to the tomb and found that the body was missing. No one has ever found that body. Even the enemies of Jesus had to admit that the tomb was empty and the body gone. The gospels tell us that the guards were bribed to say it was the disciples who stole the body while they were sleeping. But that's ridiculous! If the guards were sleeping, how would they

know it was the disciples who stole the body? Besides, a Roman guard would never fall asleep on the job. They would lose their heads if they were ever caught nodding off or snoozing.

So how do we explain the empty tomb? Over the years there have been several explanations as to why the tomb was empty. Some have said that the women actually went to the wrong tomb. But again, this doesn't make sense. The women were there when Joseph placed the body in the tomb, so they knew exactly where it was. But even more importantly, if the women and the disciples did come down with collective amnesia, surely the Roman or Jewish authorities would have brought them to the real tomb as proof that he was still dead. None of it makes sense.

Others have said that the Jewish or Roman authorities actually stole the body. But why would they do that? Suppose they had actual possession of the body when the disciples started to preach that Jesus had been raised and revival hit the town. To silence the disciples and prove that Jesus was dead, all they had to do was take the body they had supposedly stolen and parade it through the streets of Jerusalem. In one fatal swoop, they would have smothered the spread of Christianity in its cradle.

Finally, there are those who have tried to explain the empty tomb by saying that Jesus didn't really die on the cross at all. This is called the swoon theory. They say He simply passed out on the cross, was laid to rest and somehow revived from within the tomb. But anyone who leans into this theory underestimates the brutality of the ancient world. We know that after Jesus' trial He was flogged with a whip that had jagged bones and balls of lead woven into it. Historians record that many people never even survived this. So at the very least, Jesus was in critical condition by the time He got to the place of crucifixion. No wonder He had difficulty carrying His own cross. But the fact remains no one survives crucifixion. That's the whole point! It was intended to be an execution. In 1986 the *Journal of the American Medical Society* said, "Interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge."

But what if Jesus had survived after all He had gone through? What if He had the strength to unwrap His grave clothes, roll away the stone and then sneak past the Roman guard, like a stealth bomber, unseen? Think of His physical condition as He appeared to the disciples. I seriously doubt He would have inspired much belief that He had risen and actually triumphed over the grave. They most likely would have took one look at Him and called for the nearest doctor!

The truth is that Jesus **did** die on the cross. The women **did** go to the right tomb. No one stole the body; the body **had** been raised. That's why they never found it. About 10 years ago I remember sitting on the edge of my seat as the search and rescue teams put out a dragnet for three women who were missing from the

Yosemite area. An incredible amount of expertise and labor went into that search, as was done with the cruise ship that recently sunk off the Italian coast. Eventually our worst fears were realized when first two, and then the last of those dead bodies was found. No matter what's been done, no matter how devious the plan, it's hard to hide a human body. Sooner or later, bodies tend to show up. The corpse of Jesus was never found because it hadn't been stolen or hidden; it had, in fact, risen.

## The Eyewitness Testimony

The second strand of evidence for the resurrection is the eyewitness testimony. The record shows that Jesus appeared to more than 515 people. How do you explain that? These appearances spanned the morning of His resurrection to His ascension 40 days later. Ten distinct appearances are recorded for us in the New Testament. The first was the women on Sunday morning. Then He appeared to Peter and James. Several were made to the disciples as a group. One was with 500 people at the same time. They were all at different places. Some were near His tomb, others in the Upper Room where the disciples were hiding. One was on the road to Emmaus, and some were far away in the region of Galilee. In each appearance Jesus did things that showed He wasn't a figment of their imagination, but a real person. He talked with them. He ate with them. He even invited one skeptic named Thomas to touch His nail-scarred hands.

How do we explain the appearances? The most common explanation is that they were the product of people's wild imaginations or hallucinations. But psychologists will tell you that's not possible in this case. Hallucinations are like dreams or the product of mind-altering substances. They are individual events not normally shared between people unless, of course, you took some LSD at Woodstock or Altamont. But apart from this, the same hallucination doesn't usually take place among a variety of people in a variety of places over a long period of time. One expert comments, "If you had 500 people all having the same hallucination at the same time, that would be a bigger miracle than the resurrection itself."

A spin-off on this theory is that the appearances were an example of what we might call "group think." This happens when a group of people are encouraged to see an image that really isn't there through the power of suggestion. On Christmas Eve the entire family was over at Pillar Point at Half Moon Bay. It was a gorgeous day. And the hotel that everyone was staying at was right on the beach. At sunset I encouraged everyone to come out to the patio to watch for a "green flash." As some of you may know green flashes are an optical phenomena that sometimes occur shortly after sunset, when a green spot is visible, usually for no more than a second. Some cultures believe that if you are watching a sunset with loved ones and see a green flash it means that you are predestined to be together forever. Now I don't

know whether that's true or not but my wife was really into seeing the green flash; my teenage daughter, not so much. And just as the sun hit the horizon Laura thought she saw one. My daughter on the other hand was too busy tweeting to pay attention. Maybe the green flash happened, maybe it didn't. Experts would agree, however, that in order for a group of people to see something that's clearly not there, they would need to believe it so much that they simply imagined it to be true.

Could this have happened to the disciples? What's interesting is that even though Jesus had predicted His resurrection, the disciples really didn't get it. They had to be persuaded against their wills that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Mary came to the tomb on Sunday morning with spices in her hand. Why did she do that? Because she was looking for her risen Lord? No! She came to anoint His dead body. Mary wasn't expecting that Jesus had risen from the dead. In fact, when she first saw Him she thought He was the gardener! Then she went back and told the disciples who concluded that Mary had had one too many Bloody Marys that morning! If the disciples were expecting a resurrection they wouldn't have responded that way.

Then there was Thomas. The first time Jesus appeared before His disciples Thomas wasn't there. And when they told Thomas what had happened, he refused to believe it unless he saw Jesus for himself and put his hands into His wounds. That's not a man inclined towards hallucinations. That's a skeptic who had to be convinced against his better judgment. When Jesus did appear to Thomas and offered him the proof he needed, Thomas did the one and only thing that made sense; he bowed down and said, "My Lord and my God!"

If the empty tomb isn't enough, 515 eyewitnesses, including doubting Thomas, ought to be. Think of it this way—if they had a trial to decide whether Jesus returned from the dead or not the defense attorney would be able to call 515 witnesses that would all say the same thing. That's pretty conclusive evidence! When Paul told the church at Corinth that Christ had appeared before 500 people at one time, he added that many were still alive. In effect, he was saying, "If you don't believe me, go ask them. They are still around. There is Joseph at the corner of Catamaran and Shell; remember him? Then there is that alcoholic who is always hanging around the liquor store down the block. Go ask him. He's been sober since that day." So if we cross-examined those people and asked each of them to give a 15-minute account of their encounter with Christ, if we sat there in that courtroom around the clock we would be there for nearly six days listening to 128 hours of testimony. I wonder if any of us would leave that courtroom unconvinced.

### **The Explosive Change in the Disciples**

There is one final strand of evidence that we have to consider. It has to do with the explosive change that took place in the

disciples after the resurrection. The men we see in the gospels directly after the death of Christ are different in the Book of Acts—those who were depressed and without hope were suddenly courageous and willing to die after they had seen Christ.

Consider Peter. Peter denied Christ three times before the cross. Knowing his failure he wept bitterly throughout the night. After the death of Jesus he joined the other disciples in the Upper Room. John says they were all hiding "for fear of the Jews." They were afraid that the same thing that happened to Jesus would happen to them, so they huddled together like cowards. But if you turn over a page or two in your Bible you would find Peter standing on the steps of the Temple, preaching with such power that 3,000 people believed and were baptized. If you turn a couple more pages in Acts we see him defying the same Jewish council that had condemned Jesus to death, rejoicing that he was counted worthy to suffer for Christ. Peter was a new man! What made the difference?

Perhaps a better example is James. In his younger days, James wasn't even a disciple. James was the half-brother of Jesus. Can you imagine what it must have been like to live with a perfect sibling, one who was without blemish, one who never asserted himself in a self-centered way and always did his chores? I can picture James rolling his eyes and thinking, "Oh man! There goes Mr. Goody Two Shoes again." If you read the life of Christ it's clear that James, along with his other brothers disliked Jesus. At one point they even thought He was mentally imbalanced, that He was delirious. But in the first chapter of Acts, we are told that His brothers were among the believers who met to pray. Then we see James becoming the primary leader of the Jerusalem church and going on to write one of the most compelling letters in the New Testament. What happened? The answer is, again, found in the beginning verses of 1Cor. 15 where Paul is listing all the people the resurrected Christ appeared to. Nearly last on that list is . . . James. What a sweet time of reconciliation that must have been! The only way to account for the radical change in James—from a man who thought Jesus was crazy to a man willing to die for Him—is the resurrection.

Finally we come to Paul. Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus road. Formerly a religious fanatic who ruthlessly persecuted the church, Paul then became an Apostle willing to die for it. After he had founded numerous churches in Asia Minor and penned half of the New Testament, tradition records that Paul was sentenced to the Mamertine prison in Rome, where he was eventually beheaded. Dying alone and as a criminal, Paul became like his Lord even in death. He had surrendered everything in service to Christ. "To live is Christ," he wrote "and to die is gain."

Now we know that there are people today who are convinced that their cause is an honorable one when in fact it may not be. There are terrorists that are so committed they're willing to die

for things that make little sense to the rest of us. There are religious zealots who are willing to drink poison grape juice because they believe their cause worth dying for. But, that's the point. Something had convinced the disciples and apostles that Jesus was alive. People will die for political and religious beliefs they're convinced are true. People won't die for beliefs they know are false. Something convinced those ancient saints that Jesus rose from the dead. What was it? It was the fact that they had encountered the risen Lord. It's just that simple! And not even the imminent threat of death could make them deny it.

Do you see how powerful that evidence is? The disciples didn't die for a lie. They died because they believed with all their hearts that He had risen from the grave. That's why they put their hope in Him; He was the only One with the power to rescue them from death. Who else could they trust?

So what about you? What difference has the resurrected Christ made in your life? For me, Jesus has made all the difference. Most of you have heard my story so I won't bore you with the details, but there are some significant themes in it that I want to share. I pretty much grew up as a rebel without a cause—arrogant, self-willed, unwilling to yield underneath anyone's authority. And because I didn't have the tools to deal with any emotional or existential pain I developed an insatiable appetite for drugs and alcohol, like a little "pacman" gobbling up whatever numbing agent was within reach. The more I gave myself over to this lifestyle the harder my heart became and the more involved I was in criminal activities. Eventually I landed in the adult prison system where I was incarcerated for a long, long time.

Towards the end of my prison career a strange thing started happening. Other inmates, who happened to be Christians, began to cross my path, carrying a message that in Christ there was hope, even for me. The crew leader of the prison storeroom where I worked was a Christian. The northern gang member who inked my tattoo work was a professed Christian. Christians sat beside me in the chow hall. They spotted my workouts in the exercise yard. I couldn't get away from them. Although these jailhouse Christians had the best of intent, telling me about Jesus wasn't providing the necessary inroads. I needed an encounter with Jesus.

Then one day God took this donkey behind the wood shed and smacked me upside the head with a two-by-four. "I" never

survived that encounter. What I mean by that is, the self-centeredness that had driven my life up to that point died—it had been crucified, to be replaced with a God-centered orientation. New life was being birthed from out of the ashes of the old. Some of us, it seems, have to taste death before we can surrender to life. That certainly was the case for me. Jesus said, "Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it can bear no fruit." I had received through the miracle of resurrection an opportunity for God to do just that.

This is what I've learned since then:

If the resurrection of Christ is not true, then I have no hope that anything the gospel declares is true, for the resurrection is proof that His death on the cross has accomplished—and is accomplishing—my freedom from sin and death. If it's not true then death is not conquered but remains the enemy against which no human power can overcome and I am utterly powerless to its effects on a daily basis. If the resurrection is not true then I can only agree with the Greek poets that death is "one unending night" and I may as well pursue as much power, property and pleasure as I can muster, for tomorrow I die alone. If it's not true then when I lay my loved ones down I have no basis to believe I'll ever see them again. I have no grounds for optimism or comfort. I live in a disconnected world without a personal God, struggle against sin without any chance of redemption, and face the darkness of the grave without hope.

But because the resurrection is true, the gospel is, indeed, full of power to change the heart and we can all stand in the freedom it offers today. Because it is true we can hold what we love loosely knowing that this life is not all there is. Because the resurrection is true, a timeless bond connects us to our families and friends or any believer who has died. Because it is true, our sufferings are bearable. There is a place for our pain to go. And we can live each day with the certainty of being reunited with our Lord forever.

Death may have been "the last enemy" but it was not the final victor. The ultimate victory belongs to God. Through His resurrection from the dead Jesus Christ provides a living hope beyond our earthly graves.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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