

LUKE AND THE MISSION OF JESUS
(9) JESUS VINDICATED

Luke 24:1-12

Luke 24: 36-49

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SCRIPTURE

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened (Luke 24:1-12 NRSV).

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence. ⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be

proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:36-49 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis was the Deputy Director of Obstetrics at Vienna's General Hospital in the mid-nineteenth century. There were two maternity clinics at the hospital, the first of which had a high mortality rate among the mothers. Semmelweis learned that the first was served by medical students and the second, with the lower mortality rate, was served by midwives. At first he could find no other differences between the two clinics. Eventually he discovered that the medical students would typically practice cutting open cadavers in the basement before making their rounds in the maternity clinic. Semmelweis saw the connection. He made the students wash their hands with a chlorinated lime solution (what we would refer to as a disinfectant today) after working on the cadavers and before helping the expectant mothers. As a result, the death rate dropped 90% almost immediately and within a few months was nearly 0%.

Surprisingly, the medical world was not pleased. Many doctors were offended at the idea they were being told to wash their hands. They thought Semmelweis was crazy. He was committed to an asylum and died fourteen days later. He would not be vindicated until years after his death, when Louis Pasteur confirmed the germ theory and Joseph Lister, acting on the French microbiologist's research, practiced and operated, using hygienic methods, with great success. Today no serious medical professional would discount hygienic methods in their practice. This is the consequence of Semmelweis' vindication and the clear implication of the evidence.

Two thousand years ago Jesus of Nazareth said he had been sent by God to bring about the redemption of the world. People thought he was crazy or worse. He was arrested and killed. But within three days he was seen alive again. It turns out God really had sent him. The resurrection is Jesus' vindication. It would be foolish to disregard the implications.

But how do we know the resurrection took place? Couldn't it have been a fabricated story, a legend? Luke gives us several pieces of evidence that point to a real, historical event.

Early in the morning on the first day of the week certain women came to the tomb. If we were telling this story today we might say "thirty-nine hours later" (3:00 p.m. on Friday to 6:00 a.m. on Sunday) but Hebrew culture reckoned a part of a day as a whole day, and the

new day started at sunset, so that is why the Scriptures say that Jesus was in the tomb for three days.

Many of the same women who courageously witnessed Jesus' gruesome crucifixion planned to visit the tomb in order to assist the family in finalizing the body for burial. Jewish custom permitted women to prepare corpses of either gender. Aromatic oils and spices were often used.

Jesus had indicated to his followers that he would be resurrected after being put to death but, at the time, they did not understand what he meant. So it came as quite a shock for Mary Magdalene and the other women to find an empty tomb where Jesus had been buried.

But it also would have been a shock to the first readers that the initial witnesses to the resurrection were women. I have mentioned on previous occasions that women had a low standing in ancient Judea. They could not give testimony in either Roman or Jewish courts of law. If Luke was making this whole thing up why would he include women as the first witnesses? It would have done nothing but undermine the plausibility of the account with the readers of the time. The only possible explanation for Luke saying that these women were the first witnesses is because that is what actually happened.

Luke also names names. He mentions Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. He identifies Simon of Cyrene who was compelled by the soldiers to carry Jesus' cross piece to the place of execution. Later he mentions Cleopas. The naming of names is significant. In ancient times, names were like footnotes for a historical account. Luke, the historian, is challenging his readers: "Talk to these people. They're still around. Check out what I'm telling you and see if it is so."

I was a religion major in college. The religion faculty, including the college chaplain, did not have a lot in common with mainstream Christianity (a characteristic even more prevalent in today's colleges and universities). We were taught that the resurrection of Jesus did not actually take place. Stories about a resurrection were created by the disciples to capture the symbolic truths they were feeling. Jesus was dead but somehow they felt like he was still with them. They made up stories to give voice to higher truths – stories that remind us that "spring always comes after winter" and so we can always have hope.

But if you read Luke 24 even at a simple, first-impression level, this explanation comes across as a load of hoey. What does the text say?

“Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when [Jesus] had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence (24:39-43).

So what higher truth is being symbolically represented here? What aspiration is being captured by our imaginations to send our souls soaring into deeper spirituality? The answer is: Jesus is having fish and chips with his friends. Say what? Jesus is having fish and chips with his friends. What sort of symbolic truth is that?

The thing is, there is a higher truth here but it is scandalously concrete. Jesus is saying, “I’m not a symbol. I’m really here. Have you anything to eat?”

Now this is not the way to write a legend. Jesus’ request for something to eat is almost trivial, almost silly. So why is it here? Because that’s what actually happened, that’s what the eyewitnesses heard and saw. The resurrection is not a myth, not a legend, not a cliché to brighten someone’s day. It actually happened

One of the most persuasive arguments that Christ rose from the dead is the effect it had on his followers then and now. What was it that changed a band of frightened, cowardly disciples into people of courage and conviction? What was it that changed Peter from one who, the night before the crucifixion, was so afraid for his own skin that he three times denied he even knew Jesus, into a roaring lion of faith? Some fifty days later Peter risked his life by saying he had seen Jesus risen from the dead. It must be remembered that Peter preached his electric Pentecost sermon in Jerusalem, where the events took place and in the one place in all the world most antagonistic to his claims. He was not in Galilee, miles away where no one could verify the facts and where his ringing statements might go unchallenged. Only the resurrection of Christ could have produced this change.

And there is the evidence for the resurrection which is contemporary and personal. If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, he is alive today, ready to enter and change those who invite him into their lives. Millions now living bear uniform witness that their lives have been transformed by Jesus Christ. Are you one of them?

It seems to me that in light of all this you have four choices. You can choose to ignore the facts. After all, we live in a Facebook® culture. Truth is determined by likes and dislikes. Who needs facts?

There are people who hold to the opinion that Jesus was merely an ancient religious teacher and nothing more and no amount of object data to the contrary can ever change their minds. They remind me of the professor in Alfred Hitchcock's film, *The Lady Vanishes*, upon being confronted with evidence that proves his theory wrong, replies, "Nonsense. My theory is perfectly correct. It is the facts that are misleading."

But the facts concerning Jesus Christ are not misleading. They lead to the inescapable conclusion that he is who he claimed to be – the very Son of God. Who do you know in history who has said, “My enemies are going to kill me but within three days I will be seen alive again” and actually pull it off? Only one! And until someone else comes along and duplicates what Jesus did I’m banking on him being the one we need to follow.

The second choice is, to some extent, worse than the first. It is to like the Easter Story but not take it too seriously. It is to treat the resurrection of Christ in much the same way we treat stories about a rabbit who hides eggs – all part of a nice bit of wonderfulness that we have fun with once a year. One of my all-time favorite worship bulletin typos comes from a congregation in Indiana. I know what they were trying to say, but this is how it read: “This being Easter, we will ask Mrs. Johnson to come forward and lay an egg on the altar.” I dare say if Mrs. Johnson were capable of such a feat it would be remarkable indeed. But it is hardly in the same league as the real Easter story – a naked and bloodied Savior suffering and dying for the likes of you and me. No, Easter is not a nice, likeable story. Either it is a damnable lie responsible for the deception and ultimate death of millions of people or it is the most profound truth we can ever know with eternal consequences.

A third choice would be to say, “I’m sorry Jeff, I cannot take your word for it. I must investigate this for myself.” And if that is your choice my response would be an enthusiastic “go for it!” You would not be the first nor will you be the last to do so. Lee Strobel was one such person. At one-time he was an award-winning journalist with the Chicago Tribune and an atheist. He was challenged to embark on a personal investigation of the evidence for Jesus and that investigation led him to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He has compiled his investigation in a book entitled, “The Case for Christ” and I recommend it to you.¹

The fourth choice is to accept the truth that Jesus Christ did indeed rise from the dead and is alive and knowable today. There may be some of you who have never made this choice and it is my hope that you do so. In prayer, ADMIT to God your need for him.

¹Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, Zondervan Publishing.

BELIEVE that Jesus died for your sins and was raised from dead (Rom 10:9). COMMIT yourself personally to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and be willing to acknowledge that commitment in the way you live your life.

Admit, Believe, Commit.

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26 NRSV).