

Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 15, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"NO EMPTY GRAVE - NO LIVING LORD"

I Corinthians 15:1-19

Text: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." I Corinthians 15:17

Our text for this morning is very blunt. St. Paul says that if Jesus is still in the grave, what we believe doesn't mean a thing and nothing has been done about the human condition of sin. The Bible tells us some interesting things about Jesus. It says that his death was a substitute for us. He died a real death both physically and spiritually. His human body underwent incredible suffering and on the cross perished. And spiritually we know he underwent suffering we cannot even imagine as he became sin for our sakes and knew what it was to be separated and cut off from God - an agony that is at best only dimly perceived in his desolate cry from the cross, "why hast Thou forsaken me." So the Bible says he died for our sins that we might have life. And then the Bible says something else. It goes on to say that God broke into that death and brought life. It says that God raised Jesus from the dead. And that was a sign to us - it was pledge money - it was earnest - it was a proof to us - that as God overcame death in Jesus and raised him to life, so we, too, would be raised from death and have eternal life. That's what the cross and the empty tomb are all about. They are about forgiveness and life.

Now, says St. Paul, if the tomb isn't empty, a lie has been told. And if we can't believe the empty tomb, we can't believe the cross either. If the tomb is not empty, then our belief about eternal life is a lie and the business of being forgiven is a lie, too. It is as simple as that. So everything hinges on the empty tomb. If there is no empty grave, there is no living Lord.

Back in the 1930's a young British lawyer named Frank Morison decided that Christianity and the story of the empty tomb were a combination of fantasy and fable. He correctly realized that if he could disprove the resurrection, he could bring Christianity down. As an attorney, he felt he had the skills to weigh the evidence and sift through the facts, accepting nothing which did not completely meet the requirements for a court of law. The young attorney worked hard on his research and then he wrote his book. The first chapter was entitled, "The Book That Refused To Be Written". In that chapter, he tells how the evidence piled up as he worked until, against his will, he was persuaded by the weight of facts of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The book is entitled, "Who Moved The Stone?", and is one of the most powerful witnesses to the resurrection, outside of the Bible itself, that has ever been written.

One theory for the empty tomb is that the disciples stole the body. As a matter of fact, the Bible itself reports that the chief priests and elders gave money to the soldiers guarding the tomb, and instructed them to report that while they were asleep, the disciples did just that. Now, suppose you report to the police that while you were asleep, your neighbor slipped in and stole your television. Would that stand up in court? What witness knows what happened while he was asleep? The judge would throw the case out. Besides, did not those first disciples in many cases lay down their lives for their faith? And while a man might die for something he believed to be true, even if it were false, who ever heard of men giving their lives for something they knew to be a lie? And besides that, such deception is entirely out of character for all else we know about the disciples. It is impossible to believe they stole the body.

According to a second theory, the tomb was empty because the chief priests and elders themselves removed the body for safe-keeping precisely to keep the disciples from stealing it. But having put guards at the tomb, why move the body? When Peter

and John began to preach that Jesus was alive, the authorities were enraged. They beat them and threatened them to shut them up. But there was a very simple way to stop them. All they had to do was to produce the body and parade it down the street and that would be the end of that. And the fact that they didn't do that is eloquent evidence of the fact that they didn't have the body.

Another theory about the resurrection is that distraught and grief-stricken women were so upset that in the early morning hours, when they set out for the tomb, they became confused and went to the wrong place. That could happen, I suppose. But would this have been true of Peter and John also? And what of Joseph of Arimathea who owned the tomb? Certainly he would have known where it was and would have set the matter straight. And what about the authorities? Certainly they knew where the tomb was - after all, they had guards there. They could go to the right tomb and produce the body.

Then there is the swoon theory that is of relatively late origin and one that has received some recent attention. According to this theory, Jesus did not actually die. Instead, he had swooned - become unconscious - from the exhaustion and pain and loss of blood. But, when he was placed in the coolness of the tomb, he regained consciousness and reappeared. Naturally his disciples thought he had risen from the dead.

Assuming for a moment that this happened, is it creditable to imagine Jesus surviving in a damp tomb for three days without food or water or medical attention? Could he have removed the binding grave cloths, pushed away the heavy stone door, gotten by the Roman guards, and walked away on feet that had been pierced by spikes?

And incredible as that is, suppose he did it and then appeared to his disciples. Could a man half-dead, creeping about ill, weak, wounded, needing the greatest of care, have convinced his disciples he was a conqueror over death and the grave, that he was the Prince of Life? No, it is too incredible. Such a figure would have only weakened their faith and the impression he had made on them. They could not have responded in enthusiasm and worship to such a figure. On the weight of evidence, such a swoon theory simply will not stand up at all. Besides, if Christ did swoon and then let his disciples not only believe he had risen from the dead, but in fact, encouraged the idea, makes Jesus a liar and a charlatan.

But not only must we look at the empty tomb, we must also examine the appearances of Jesus that are recorded. There are ten distinct appearances recorded in the New Testament in a span of forty days following his resurrection. There is no pattern in the appearances. They show great variations as to time and place and people. Two appearances were to Peter and James. There were appearances to the disciples as a group, one appearance was to the two men on the road to Emmaus. One appearance, as we read in our scripture this morning, was to more than five hundred people. He appeared in different places, such as the garden, the upper room, the Emmaus road, and far away in Galilee. And each time he appeared, he said different things and did different things. There simply was no consistent pattern to those resurrection appearances.

One explanation is that the appearances were hallucinations. Now, modern medicine has observed that there are certain laws that apply to the psychological phenomena of hallucinations. One of those laws is that hallucinations ordinarily occur in people who are vividly imaginative and who have a nervous makeup. But Jesus appeared to all sorts of people. True, some of them may have fit the required personality pattern, but obviously, not all of them. Another law is that hallucinations are extremely subjective and individual. Consequently, no two people have the same experience. Each person's hallucination is different. But Jesus appeared to

groups of two or eleven or even 500 and they all experienced the same thing.

Another rule is that hallucinations ordinarily occur at particular times and particular places and always have some association with the event being fancied. But the appearances of Jesus don't fit this pattern. He appeared indoors, outside, in the morning, the afternoon, the evening. Another general rule about hallucinations is that they occur over a long period of time with some regularity. However, the appearances of Jesus occurred over a period of forty days and then abruptly stopped. After that, no one claimed they happened again.

Finally, another general rule about hallucinations is that a person must want to believe so much in something that isn't there that he projects it and imagines it is real. But just the opposite occurred with the disciples. They had to be persuaded against their wills that Jesus was alive. Mary going to the tomb with spices to anoint a dead body didn't expect to see Jesus. And when she did, she mistook him for the gardener! When the disciples heard it they didn't believe it. The Bible says they thought it an "idle tale". Then there is the classic example of the disciple from Missouri, Thomas. He wouldn't believe until he put his fingers in the wounds of Jesus.

So, if a person thinks the appearances of Jesus were hallucinations, he does so against all the evidence.

What changed Peter from a person who, just before the crucifixion, denied Jesus three times to save his own hide, into a stalwart of the faith? Why did he change and boldly proclaim a living Lord at the risk of his life? Why did the Christian church come into being? We know as a historical fact that it began in Palestine around 32 A.D. Was there some tremendous event that brought it into being as those first Christians claimed - or was there some unknown reason they didn't tell us about? And how did Sunday become the day of worship of people who were Jews and who had been taught to observe the seventh day of the week, the Jewish Sabbath, as the day of worship? Christians from the beginning said it was because they wanted to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. If the resurrection did not account for this radical and dramatic change, then what did? And what about the New Testament? Its existence is based on the resurrection of Jesus. Were the writers of those books which were to shape their destiny as well as the destiny of the world deluded liars or were they men who told the truth?

So, when we look at all the stakes, we discover they are very high indeed. If there is no empty grave - there is no living Lord. But when we examine all the evidence, we are driven to the conclusion that the grave was indeed empty and that there is, after all, a living Lord.

But, having said all of that, there is one final bit of evidence that is needed. You see, one may look at all the evidence and agree that it is conclusive. One may examine the witnesses and the mind agree that the facts are true. Yes, one may believe that the record is authentic and that the man Jesus who was crucified did indeed rise from the dead. Yet, it will not matter. You see, the ultimate question is this: Is he alive in my heart? There are millions who have testified that the living Jesus has revolutionized their lives. Many here this morning can give testimony as to how Jesus changed their lives. That's the ultimate test, isn't it? Is he truly alive for you - have you let him change your life?