

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 3, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:20

“Christ **did** rise from the dead!” (Moffatt)

EASTER—FACT OR FICTION?

“Christ **did** rise from the dead!” Well, **did** He? Is the Scriptural affirmation fact or fiction? Dr. C. E. M. Joad, professor of philosophy of the University of London, and one of the outstanding British philosophers of the 20th century, was, for most of his life, an agnostic. But in his later years he became a convinced Christian. Back in his years of unbelief he once said, “If I could ask one question of one person only, I would ask Jesus Christ, ‘Did you really rise from the dead?’”

On the first Easter morning, some people at Jerusalem made an astonishing claim. They said that Jesus of Nazareth, Who had been crucified two days before, had come out of His tomb and was alive. They even declared that they had met Him, and that He had talked with them. Some days later He appeared to more than 500 of His friends as they were gathered in assembly. The story spread like wildfire. They told their friends; they spoke to people in the street; they addressed crowds in the marketplace; they greeted each other with the triumphant salutation, “The Lord is risen!” And finally, their enthusiasm was such that they stormed the cities of the Roman Empire with their message.

Christianity broke on the world as a religion of RESURRECTION. This was the tremendous truth that sent Christ’s followers through the Roman Empire like a forest fire. This was the exhilarating, heart-uplifting fact that throbbed through every word they spoke, and eventually turned the world upside down. This was the message which for 2,000 years has been transforming the lives of countless men and women, boys and girls, the world over.

What really happened that Easter morning long ago? Did Jesus actually rise from the dead? Can we today retain our intellectual integrity and still believe in the fact of His physical resurrection? I’m quite certain we can. I believe the evidence points unmistakably and irrefutably to the risen Lord.

However, suppose that we are skeptical—that we just don’t believe that this miracle happened. It seems to me that there are three things we might say:

- 1. Some have said that Jesus never really died on the Cross**, that He was taken down in a swoon, and in the cool tomb recovered, and made His way out. But such a theory will satisfy few people. A person who had been hanging in the scorching Eastern sun for six hours would be an invalid needing months of rest, even if he survived crucifixion. We must remember that the Romans took especial care to make sure that a criminal condemned to be crucified was in fact

dead. In Christ's case one of the Roman soldiers ran a spear through His side, undoubtedly piercing the heart chamber and ensuring death. We should remember too that such a person, if he did survive, would be in no condition to move a heavy stone, make his way into a garden, and then deceive his followers into believing that he was the triumphant conqueror of death.

But those who say He didn't really die on the cross do not go on even to ask, let alone answer, the next question: "What happened to Him afterwards? When and where did He eventually die? Where was He buried, and why was His tomb not venerated?"

No, this theory simply will not hold water.

2. Others have said, "The whole story was a put-up job. These disciples of Jesus, who had given up their daily work, and for three years had followed the Preacher from Nazareth, had really been led up the garden path. And now that they had lost their Leader, they had to find some way to save face. So, they invented the whole story about Him rising from the dead."

Now such a suggestion is patently untrue, for one very good reason. Those disciples, with all their shortcomings, were certainly not hypocrites. A hypocrite doesn't die for his hypocrisy, and those men, with one possible exception, suffered martyrdom for what they believed—Peter even asking to be crucified upside down because he was not worthy to die as did his Lord.

And remember, too, the disciples were utterly sincere in what they preached; and the Resurrection was the most prominent topic of their preaching. Do you imagine for one moment that thousands of converts could have been won to Christ in those early days through preaching which the preachers themselves knew to be untrue?

The Jews even went so far as to say that the tomb was empty because the disciples stole the body. The fact that this rumor ever arose, about the stealing of the body, is really very good evidence that the tomb was empty. But the story that the disciples stole the body is foolish. What did they do with it? If you enjoy detective fiction as much as I do, you will know how hard it is to dispose of a body! And remember that the infant Church had fierce and implacable enemies, and those enemies had only to produce the body to completely discredit the Christian faith. They must have searched every nook and cranny within miles of Jerusalem!

Again, I say—these men and women were sincere—they really believed that Jesus rose from the dead. They gained converts. And they themselves suffered martyrdom. If the whole thing had been a fraud, would they have given their lives for it? Of course not. It is ludicrous to suppose that the disciples, who were hiding in terror, stole the body of Jesus, disposed of it, and then suddenly became heroes and martyrs, ready to preach the gospel of the resurrection, to die for the truth of a story which they had made up themselves, and to inaugurate a movement to teach people truth by founding it on a lie. No, this theory simply won't wash.

3. Still others have said, "The disciples were deluded. Perhaps they just imagined that Jesus had risen from the dead! Perhaps they were the victims of wishful thinking. They were honest men, no doubt, but they were simply misled, deluded into thinking that this miracle had taken place."

But again, this argument cannot stand the searchlight of scrutiny. Why should the disciples have imagined that Jesus had risen from the dead? You usually imagine something has happened only when you expect it to happen. But the disciples never expected to see their Master again. Skulking behind bolted doors in Jerusalem for fear of the Jews, their mood was not one of enthusiasm and expectancy, but rather one of despondency and despair. They believed that they had been misled—indeed, they believed that Jesus Himself had been misled. And all they wanted was to get back to the work they had left three years before. You remember Peter said to some of his fellow disciples, “I’m going fishing” (John 21:3). He felt he must get back to his old work as a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. Thomas simply wouldn’t believe the Resurrection story until he saw the risen Christ and beheld with his own eyes the nail prints and the spear wound. And remember too, this thing involved hundreds of people. As I said earlier, St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:6 tells us that on one occasion after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to more than 500 people at once. Were they all deluded?

As Abraham Lincoln said, “It is true that you may fool all the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time; but you can’t fool all of the people all the time.” And let me add this: if you think those first Christians were people suffering from a delusion, you have got to go on to say that the whole story of the Christian Church has been built on a delusion. You have got to affirm that for almost 2,000 years, lives have been changed, vile characters have been made upright, as the result of a delusion. It is surely much harder to believe that than to believe in the Resurrection.

Let us stand by the facts. Look at those first disciples—cowards every one of them. They ran away from Jesus, betraying Him and denying Him with oaths. But think of the stupendous change which took place in them within a few short weeks! From sniveling cowards, they were transformed into people who were willing to lay their lives on the line daily, until martyrdom finally caught up with them. Think of the Church which has been erected upon the Resurrection faith. Think of the untold blessings this Resurrection faith has launched upon the world. Remember the lives snatched from off life’s rubbish heap by the power of the Resurrection Gospel. How can we explain these things apart from the empty tomb?

You know, of course, that the Resurrection of Christ is the very core of the Gospel. It is not a sort of epilogue to the Gospel, a divine afterthought, a mere appendix to the faith, like a codicil tacked on to a last will and testament. It isn’t that at all. This is the faith. If Christ had not been raised from the dead there could be no Christian faith and no Christian Church today.

There is no Gospel in the Cross by itself, in a man dead upon a Roman scaffold. If we are left only with a dead body in a tomb, then we would have to believe that Jesus was, after all, radically mistaken about His whole mission to this earth—that, in fact, He was a dismal failure. A dead body in a tomb would merely mean that one more martyr had thrown his life away. Without the Resurrection, there would be for us nothing but memories of a dead and discredited Jesus.

It is vitally important to realize that the Christian faith begins not at the Cross but at the empty tomb. Christian faith looks at everything in the light of Easter morning. We do not go

back and build our faith on Jesus the Teacher and Preacher and Healer from Galilee; in a very real sense that Jesus does not exist any more. The truth is that His earthly life of humiliation ended with His death on the Cross. The One in Whom we place our trust is the risen and glorified Redeemer.

We read this morning (Mark 16:1-8) about how three women came to the tomb, wondering if they could get some strong men to roll away the stone so that they might get in to anoint the body of their Lord. But to their amazement they found that the stone had been rolled away!

Did you ever ask yourself the question—Why was the stone rolled away? It was certainly not to let the Lord out. His glorified resurrection body was of such a nature that He was independent of doors and indifferent to walls. John explicitly tells us, “The doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’” (John 20:19). And yet the stone was rolled away. Why? I’ll tell you. It was rolled away not to let Him out, but to let those women in! It was not the means of His exit; it was the means of their entrance. God rolled the stone away, not that His Son might flee the grave but that we might know that He had risen, that we might steal into the empty tomb and see only “the place where they had laid Him.”

I want to end the sermon on a very personal note. What can it mean for you and me today, this great fundamental truth of our Christian faith? If our Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and is alive today, what then? Can that miracle, performed 2,000 years ago, affect and influence my life today? It certainly can, and in two ways:

1. It assures me of life after death. Jesus said to His disciples, “Because I live, you will live also” (John 14:19). The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the one sure proof we have that death is a defeated foe. Indeed, there is no other proof for life after death that can convince me. If Jesus never rose from the dead, how could we? If the one perfect life that ever lived did not make it through the iron curtain called “death,” how could anyone else? But He did, and because of that, I am as certain that I will reach heaven as I am sure that He is there!

Do you know how news of the Battle of Waterloo came to England? There were no telegrams in those days, but everyone knew that Wellington was facing Napoleon in a great battle. On the morning of June 19, 1815, a sailing ship off shore semaphored news to a signalman on top of Winchester Cathedral. He, in turn, signaled to another man on a hill, and the news of the battle was relayed, by hand semaphore, from station to station, to London, and all across England. When the ship came near shore, the signalman on board semaphored the first word, “Wellington.” The next word was “defeated,” and then fog descended, and the ship could not be seen. “Wellington defeated” went across England, causing consternation everywhere. But after three hours the fog lifted, and the signal came again, “Wellington defeated the enemy!” Then all England rejoiced!

There was that awful day when they put the body of our Lord in the tomb; and everyone said, “This is the end of the line; sin has conquered; death has triumphed.” But two days later the fog lifted. Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and the truth comes down to us across the span of 2,000 years—

“Jesus defeated the enemy”—sin and death.

2. It assures me of abundant life here and now. Paul says that Christ was raised from the dead that “we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:4). Our holy faith, founded upon an empty cross and an empty tomb, is not merely a design for dying; it is a design for living! As a Christian, saved by sovereign grace, I know that I have died with Christ, been buried with Christ, and have risen with Christ to a completely new life, because He, the victorious Lord, indwells me and enables me to be what in my own feeble strength I could never be! Paul says it like this: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me...” (Galatians 2:20).

One day two men walked down a garden path, and they talked as they went. When they reached the end of the path, they stood opposite an old shed. There were a lot of garden implements in it, old boxes, a spade, and a good deal of rubbish. As they talked, one man said to the other, “What’s that you’ve got on the shelf there?” “Why, it’s an old golf club,” replied the other; and he took down from the shelf an old rusty putter. The other man swung it in his hand and said to his friend, “I like the feel of this club; do you mind if I have it?” “Take it away,” said his friend. “It was never any advantage to my game. I threw it in there one day in disgust, and it has been there ever since!” That evening a young golfer went home with that old rusty putter under his arm. Some time afterwards, at the Royal and Ancient Golf Club at St. Andrews, Scotland, a putt was made on the 18th green. The ball traveled across the green, and into the hole, and that putt enabled Bobby Jones to win the Open Golf Championship of Great Britain. In the same year, 1930, he also won the British Amateur, and the U.S.A. Amateur and Open Championships, all four major events in one year, a feat never accomplished before or since. But Bobby Jones did it, and as he himself admitted, he did it with that old, disused, castaway putter! That putter is now historic. Jones affectionately nicknamed it “Calamity Jane”—an old, disused, rusty putter, once thrown carelessly into a garden tool shed, but now, in the hands of the “master” who carried it from triumph to triumph!

Perhaps some of you, although you may be quite young, are beginning to feel that your life has already gotten a bit rusty and aimless. Perhaps some of you are dissatisfied; your ideals are not being achieved; you are frustrated because you know there are things in your life which are displeasing to God, but you feel you can’t conquer them. Sin makes you feel dirty inside.

On this Easter morning, allow the nail-pierced hands of the risen Christ to take hold of you and save you. Give yourself over to His control. If you do, He will enable you to fulfil the purpose for which you were created. You will know from personal experience that He is indeed the living Lord; and you will be able to say with Savonarola, that great 15th century herald of the Reformation, who sealed his testimony with his blood:

“They may kill me if they please;
But they will never, never, never
tear the living Christ from my heart!”

AMEN.