

“EITHER ... OR”  
Acts 17:1-9, I Corinthians 15:12-23, Matthew 28:1-15  
Resurrection Day, March 31, 2024

“Josh McDowell entered university as a young man looking for a good time and searching for happiness and meaning in life. He tried going to church, but found religion unsatisfying. He ran for student leadership positions but was disappointed by how quickly the glamour wore off. He tried the party circuit, but he woke up Monday mornings feeling worse than ever.

“He finally noticed a group of students engaged in Bible study, and he became intrigued by the radiance of one of the young ladies. He asked her a reason for it. She looked him straight in the eye, smiled, and said, ‘Jesus Christ.’

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,’ he retorted, ‘don’t give me that garbage about religion.’

“She replied, ‘I didn’t say religion; I said Jesus Christ.’

“The students invited him to intellectually examine the claims of Christ and the evidence supporting Christianity. He accepted their challenge, and after much study and research, finally admitted that he couldn’t refute the body of proof supporting Christianity. McDowell received Christ as his Savior, and his research became the background for his book, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*.

“One of the major factors in his conversion to Christianity was his inability to ignore the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ, a point he made later to a student at the University of Uruguay who asked him, ‘Professor McDowell, why can’t you intellectually refute Christianity?’

“For a very simple reason,’ replied McDowell. “I am not able to explain away an event in history - the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

That is the situation we are at today with regard to the resurrection accounts of Jesus. In Matthew’s Gospel we have the troubling decision of those who chose to not believe the resurrection of Jesus. They were stuck between the religious leaders of Temple in Jerusalem, and the experience they had just had at the tomb on the third day after Jesus’ crucifixion. Listen to it. (READ Matthew 28:1-15).

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<sup>1</sup> (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 250)

Not only had the women experienced the magnificent work of the angel early that morning after Sabbath, but the soldiers guarding the tomb also saw it, and they became so afraid that they fainted on the spot. You see, the full appearance of an angel is not the pretty, frilly pictures we most commonly see presented today, but rather a fully geared heavenly being ready for battle. These soldiers knew battle, and when they looked at the angel, their strength left them, and they gave in to their fear, and they “*became like dead men*” (Matt. 28:4).

Yet, in contrast to the soldiers’ response to seeing the angel, the women seem only to have bowed down in fear. The angel told them not to be afraid, and he let them know about what was taking place - that Jesus was not in the tomb, but had risen from the dead. They were to go tell the other disciples so that they could go to Galilee where they would meet Jesus.

But it is the actions of these two groups that indicates their level of faith. The women faithfully followed the instructions of the angel filled with joy, and then met Jesus as they returned home. What greater joy was theirs at seeing Jesus! And they worshiped Him.

On the other hand, upon recovering from their frightful faint, some of the guards went to their officials to report what had taken place. You see, the guards were to protect that tomb and not let anyone get close, much less open the tomb to take out Jesus’ body. Theirs was a duty that demanded their total commitment, even unto death, they were to protect that tomb. There was to be no sleeping on the job, because if they were found asleep, they could be executed right there on the spot. So having failed in their jobs, they slunk back to the chief priests to tell them that they had failed. They were faithful to report to the officials what had happened, but their faith in Jesus was nothing. Even though they had seen the angel, even though they had seen the empty tomb with the stone rolled away, they preferred to accept the large sum of money given to them by the elders, and to tell the lie that the disciples had robbed the tomb while they slept.

Though they had witnessed the wondrous working of the Lord God Almighty, they refused to claim Jesus as the Messiah. They chose to follow the commands of their earthly leaders, having been

bribed to tell lies about the whole event. They disregarded the wonders of God and chose to accept and perpetuate a lie. And that lie was spread throughout the region so much that many of the Jews believed their lie, rather than hearing the truth of the women and other disciples of Jesus who were also eye witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Their love of money turned them away from any faith that Jesus had risen from the dead.

But we cannot get rid of Easter. The resurrection Day events continue to live on, and we are challenged to not only observe them, but rejoice in them with faith that drives us into a deeper relationship with Jesus.

George Buttrick puts it this way. "Even if we fail to choose God's Easter beckoning in glad response to His grace, we cannot get rid of Easter. Soon or late we must come to terms with the Resurrection.

"The Mosque of St. Sophia in Istanbul was originally a Christian Church, though the Christian symbols and inscriptions have been overlaid. A visitor noticed, as he stood under the great dome, that a picture of the ascendant Christ, His arms outstretched in blessing, was showing through the covering paint; and the visitor exclaimed, almost despite himself, 'He is coming back. You cannot blot Him out!'

"If you wish to prophesy, with some chance of success, in a world which seems to falsify all man's guesses, prophesy that Christ will come back when the cruel simplification of Communism, the greedy self-entanglements of capitalism, and the dull average of socialism have all been forgotten. Even if men fail the Easter beckoning, God in the present Spirit of Jesus will not fail us."<sup>2</sup>

Each of us must make up our own minds about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Many, like the soldiers, have attempted to downplay and disparage the richness of Jesus' resurrection. Many postulate that He was never really dead, but merely swooned while on the cross and resuscitated while in the tomb. (They haven't taken in the spear thrust into Jesus' side while He was on the cross, bring forth an issue of blood and water.) No, Jesus was quite dead on the cross. The Romans were quite

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<sup>2</sup> (Charles L. Wallis, editor, *Lenten-Easter Sourcebook*, [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1961] pg. 159)

good at making sure that none of those who were crucified ever got down from the cross alive. They were very good at killing those on crosses. And even the report to Pilot that Jesus was dead already, surprised him. And when the sun went down on that day before the Sabbath, the chief priests asked that the legs of the other two men crucified with Jesus be broken so that they would die quicker. No, Jesus did not resuscitate in the tomb and walk out on his own human strength.

Others state simply that the people got the wrong tomb and went to an empty tomb instead. (So why did the chief priests get a detachment of soldiers to guard the wrong tomb?) No, it was the right tomb, but it was only rented for three days. Joseph of Arimathea knew where his tomb was, and that was where Jesus had been laid. It was the right tomb alright.

Others still cling to the lie that the disciples stole the body of Jesus and did away with it in order to perpetuate the story that Jesus had risen from the dead. But the question then follows, if that were the case, why did the disciples all die clinging to their accounts of seeing Jesus alive again? If it were a lie, certainly some of them would have recanted their stealing the body in order to preserve their own lives. Yet none of the followers of Jesus reversed their statements of their encounters with the risen Jesus.

So it is ours to choose what accounts we will listen to, and what sources we will trust as to the accounts that happened on that day we call Easter. We have the choice of believing the disciples, or believing the soldiers who sold themselves out for money and commanded to tell a lie.

And that brings us to today. What do we believe? What do we put our faith and trust in?

Olin S. Reigstad makes a great case when he asks, “Has the Easter message we have so often heard really made much difference in our living? There is an inevitable drift of things in life. We are fluid, not static. Either life as it progresses becomes very pregnant with meaningful things, or by the same token it becomes more and more empty and meaningless. Life can be poor, or it can be rich. These tendencies are universal. The steady rhythmic beats of time produce within us either life or death. Life and death eternal are present, not post mortem, possessions. Immortality may be good or it may be bad, depending upon whether we choose to be with God or away from God. Eternal death is always

away from God. Either we are immortally with God or we are immorally away from God. But who would honestly care for an existence after death if it must be apart from God? Eternal life begins here and now. The disciples who walked with Jesus came to possess it, and the faithful ones of every age have learned to know its gracious meaning, its precious value. It was the Savior who by His resurrection “brought life and immortality to light.”<sup>3</sup>

But our condition in eternity depends upon what we do with Jesus here on this earth. We have to make the choice which voice we will hear - the truth or a lie. Sadly, many people only hear the lie and then they struggle the rest of their lives to hear anything but the lie. They refuse to claim Jesus as the risen Lord, and they die not knowing the real life that only Jesus gives. They live their life as hard and as fast as they can, yet they always end up on the wrong end of things. Oh, they may make millions of dollars throughout their lives, but they are the emptiest, angriest, most distorted people in the world. They sell themselves out for riches, and they miss out the riches of heaven found only in Jesus.

So it is up to us, as believers in Jesus Christ, to live in such ways as to demonstrate the difference that Jesus makes in us. Like the young Bible study student letting the radiance of Jesus shine through her, we can grow in our own relationship with Jesus that our lives reflect that same radiance, and we are able to direct others to finding Jesus Christ.

But “one of the saddest things about our modern observance of Easter is our neglect of Jesus’ great post-Easter program. We are all perfectly willing to rejoice with Him on Easter Day and to share in His triumph over death and the grave. What a splendid thrill sweeps over the soul when the choir sings and when [the bells play], and when, amid the ecstasy of beauty, joy, and hope, we feel that we, too, know that our Redeemer lives and that, though we perish, yet shall we live and be like Him and never die.

“All that on Easter, all that with fervor that is fine and deep, and then on the Sunday follow Easter, what do we find? A tired and scanty congregation of elderly folks, possibly? The same old

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<sup>3</sup> (Charles L. Wallis, editor, *Lenten-Easter Sourcebook*, [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1961] pg. 158)

wearisome problems, the same old indifference and coldness, the same lack of spirit, the same unwillingness to dare and to do and to die?” (Gerhard E. Lenski)<sup>4</sup>

That’s not what Jesus wants us to be like! We are to let Jesus’ resurrection live in our hearts and lives every day of the year! We are to model ourselves after the women who discovered the open tomb with an angel sitting on the stone! We are to first humble ourselves before the majesty and glory of the Lord, and then, we’re to go out to tell those around us of the marvelous thing that God did for us. Jesus Rose From The Dead To Bring Us Eternal Life! He has risen to break our bondage to sin so that we can live for Him each and every day of our lives! Jesus has put death to death so that we no longer need to fear the grave! Jesus rose from the grave to tell us that if we believe in Him and profess Him as our Savior and obey His commands, we will be with Him in glory in the presence of our glorious God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit! Now and forever!

That’s the great Good News that the world needs to hear! But they won’t hear it or see it unless we believe it and live it! That’s what kick-started the early Church! That’s what has given life to people around the world for all of the ages since Jesus’ resurrection! That’s what transforms our lives from empty worldliness to full Godliness! It’s what makes others think twice about a relationship with God! It’s what changes families. It’s what changes communities. It’s what changes cities, and states and nations throughout the world. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is history’s greatest moment, and it is for all of us to believe, claim and live, not so that we go and do our own thing, but we follow Jesus’ example to bring life to the world.

But the dialogue continues between those who do not believe or those who have not heard, and the ones who firmly receive the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Acts 17 tells of Paul sharing the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection with the people of Thessalonica. He convinced many of Jesus’ resurrection, but there were still some who would not believe. Then, Paul took the message to the Corinthians and argued of the relevance of Jesus resurrection and the importance for us who are within the life of the

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<sup>4</sup> (Charles L. Wallis, editor, *Lenten-Easter Sourcebook*, [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1961] pg. 159)

church to believe and live it. But there were still some who would not believe. So the situation continues even into today, where there are some who will not believe, until they are caught by the love of Jesus' resurrection power.

People need to see Jesus through us, and to be challenged by us to consider the importance of Jesus' resurrection. Either they will believe it, or they will not, but the choice is theirs. But we have to live it so that they can be confronted by it to be changed in it. Here's how it can work.

“Chuck Colson, exhausted from an over-booked schedule, arrived in rain and fog at a prison in remote Montana on the day before Easter, 1988. He was to speak at two services that morning, and the first went badly. Dog-tired and dry, his preaching lacked enthusiasm, and he sensed that he wasn't reaching the men at all. Between services, he went to the chaplain's office, sank to his knees beside the desk, and earnestly asked the Lord to take away his frustration, exhaustion, and despair. But as he rose from his knees, he felt no different and was too tired to greet the inmates as they began assembling. Waiting as long as possible to enter the service, he was surprised to find the room packed. As he took his seat, one of the inmates rose to give a testimony.

“Ten years ago when Chuck Colson came to this prison,' the man began, 'I was in my cell. I had no intention of coming to the chapel to hear him. I knew he was a phony, and I wanted nothing to do with Christianity. But everyone in the prison seemed to be talking about the visit. The governor was coming with Colson, as well as a lot of television and newspaper reporters. *If Colson can get the governor to come to prison, I thought, I might as well see what he is all about.*'

“Then the man turned to Colson and said, 'I listened to you preach, and I was impressed, but I wasn't buying it. When the meeting ended, I headed for the door. Somehow you were there before me, and you cut me off at the pass. You looked right at me and asked, “Do you know Jesus Christ as your Savior?” I looked back at you and said, “No.”

“I'll never forget -' the man continued. 'You looked me straight in the eye and said, “Well, why are you here, then? You'd better get with it.”

“That exchange haunted me. It was the beginning of my spiritual journey. Soon after, I gave my life to Jesus, and everything has been different ever since.’

“The inmate, having given his own heart to Christ, had begun to evangelize inside the prison. One after another, prisoners had come to Christ.

“You see all these me, Chuck? This is the body of Christ that has grown up as a result of that meeting ten years ago. The church is alive inside this prison.’

“Amid thunderous applause, the inmate proceeded to give Chuck a collection taken in the prison for Prison Fellowship’s ministry.

“I felt their vitality flood into me,’ Chuck later recalled. ‘I had come to them weary and worn out, and the church inside the prison - planted without my knowledge ten years earlier - replenished me with its love and faithfulness. Just at the point of need, the power of the resurrected Christ flowed from one part of His body into another.’

“That Easter I had proof once again, in His living presence among a band of Christian inmates, that Jesus Christ is risen again”<sup>5</sup>

We make the choice of either believing or not believing in Jesus’ resurrection. Our life depends upon the choice we make. And the lives of others depend upon it, too. So let your life abundantly reflect the glory of the risen Christ Jesus, so that others can see it in you, and come to know Christ Jesus through you. Let’s pray.

Father God, we praise You and thank You for sending Jesus to us so that we can find eternal life in Him. You have given us the choice to either receive Jesus or reject Jesus’ work for us. And that decision determines our eternal destiny. So give us the assurance that we need today that Jesus really did die for our sins, that He really did rise from the grave for our salvation, and that He is truly the Savior of the world. As we come to receive this Good News, may our hearts be opened, and remain open, to Your truth, guiding us into a life-long relationship with You. And as we live for You, let the joy of Christ abide in us so strongly that others can see it and question us about it, and we can tell them that Jesus is the One who has changed us. Give us the courage and the enthusiasm of Jesus’ resurrection that we take Him with us wherever we go. Use us, so that we might continue to spread the Good News. We pray all of this in the Name of our Risen Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord. AMEN.

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<sup>5</sup> (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 248-249)