

Easter Sunday – April 4, 2010
First Baptist Vancouver

Text: Luke 24:1-12
Title: Why We Believe It Really Happened

“Nonsense.” Pure nonsense.

That is the **first** reaction of
of the **first** people
who heard the **first** announcement of the Easter news.

“Nonsense.”

Understandably so!

For nothing like it had ever happened before.

Nothing like it was even expected to happen.

Yes, some of the Jews of the first century
hoped for resurrection at the end of time.

But nothing like what the women were announcing.

Resurrection before the end of time?

And for one individual before the end of time?

“Nonsense.”

A perfectly understandable

first reaction

to the headlines

that came out of Jerusalem's cemetery

that Sunday morning.

“He is not here. He is risen.”

“Nonsense.”

The word used in the text we just read is a medical term.

Not surprising given that the author of the text was a medical doctor.

The word Dr. Luke uses refers to the delirium caused by a fever.

“You are crazy,”

would be an accurate way to render

the first disciple's reaction to the Easter Gospel.

Better yet, “You are out of your mind.”

When we turn the page

and begin to read the elaboration of the headlines,

the response of “Nonsense” intensifies.

Not only is the claim that the Nazarene is alive,

but that He is alive in new way.

On the evening of Easter Sunday

Jesus came to the first disciples who were huddled in an
upstairs apartment

somewhere downtown Jerusalem.

Jesus simply appeared in bodily form ... out of nowhere.

Without knocking at the door.

Without opening the door.

He just walked through the door!

Knowing they were thinking they were seeing a ghost,

Jesus asks, "Have you anything to eat?"

The crucified one is alive ... in a body ...

but in a new body no longer

subject to space and time.

"Nonsense."

Turn the page and read the implications of the headline.

Because the crucified Carpenter has been resurrected,

the grip of the great enemy has been broken.

Death has finally met someone it could not hold.

And therefore death does not have the awful finality it once
had.

Because He has defeated death, death can no longer defeat us.

"Nonsense."

Turn the page again.

Because Jesus of Nazareth is alive,

a new day has dawned for the world, a new day that will never end.

James S. Stewart of Scotland put it so powerfully:

“When Christ left the grave, it was not merely an announcement that there is a hereafter and a life beyond

...

It was the shattering of history by a creative act of God Almighty. It was a cosmic event, in which God was doing something comparable only with what He had done at the first creation. This was the beginning of a new era for the universe” (*A Faith to Proclaim*, 106).

“Nonsense!”

Turn the page again.

Because Jesus of Nazareth is alive

His crucifixion is all He said it would be.

It is the satisfaction of Divine justice.

It is the payment of the Ransom that sets the prisoners free.

It is the victory over the powers of sin and evil.

“Nonsense!”

Turn the page again.

Because Jesus of Nazareth is alive

He is exalted to the highest station in the universe.

He is now Lord of lords and ladies.

He is now King of kings and queens.

He now has the last word over everything!

“Nonsense!”

This is crazy!

Turn the page yet again.

Something powerfully creative happened **to** Jesus that first Easter.

And what happened **to** Jesus

is going to happen **to** billions of other human beings.

Indeed, what happened **to** Jesus

is going to happen to all of creation.

He is the beginning and archetype

of a whole new creation.

“Nonsense! You are out of your mind.”

Luke the physician tells us that some women had gone to the cemetery

early in the morning on the first day of the week.

They had gone their to anoint the body of their dear friend.

To anoint the dead body of their dead friend. To anoint
the dead body of their dead dear friend.

When they arrived at the tomb

they find that the huge stone

which had been cemented in front of the opening

had been rolled away.

And to their horror ...

not to their delight ...

but to their horror the body of their friend was gone!

They looked around only to see two men

dressed in dazzling clothes, who said to them:

“Why do you seek the Living One among the dead?

He is not here. He has risen.”

The women were stunned ... as any of us would have been.

They were caught off guard.

They were confused, dis-oriented. Understandably so.

They quickly run to the house

where the other disciples were staying.

And with conflicting thoughts and feelings,

proclaimed what they had seen and heard.

And Luke records the others' response.

“They **would not** believe them.”

Not, “They **did not** believe them.”

But, “They **would not** believe them.”

Why?

“Because,” says Luke,

“their words seemed to them like nonsense.”

Like an idle tale.

Like sheer imagination.

Humbug.

We in the 21st century tend to think that people of the first century

were naïve, unenlightened, uncritical bumkins.

“They would believe anything,” we say.

“They would have no trouble embracing news like

the resurrection of one man in the middle of history.

But that is simply not the case.

Read the four Gospels

and watch the first disciples react to

the words and deeds of Jesus,
and you are struck by what William Stringfellow called
“exemplary disbelief.”

They had all kinds of problems with Jesus’ miraculous deeds.

And they had all kinds of problems
with the utterly fantastic news
coming out of Jerusalem’s cemetery.

They would not believe it right away.

For the news did not fit their 1st century world-view
any more than it fits any of our 21st century world-
views.

“It seems to them as nonsense.”

Understandably so.

YET ... not many days after that Easter morning,

those same men and women

were alive in a dynamic faith in the Resurrected Jesus.

So contagious was their faith

that within weeks thousands of others

had come to believe that the headlines were true.

The news spread like wild-fire.

Within a few years, writes Michael Green of England,

the city of Rome
 “had been heavily affected,
 so had Alexandria, Ephesus, Antioch
 and the other main cities of the Empire;
 within 30 years the news, and belief in it,
 had spread into the rural areas of North Africa,
 inland Turkey and up to the Russian border”
 (*The Empty Cross of Jesus*, 91).

Why?

What changed their initial, understandable “nonsense” response?

Why did people come to believe

that “the nonsense news” actually happened?

Two things.

Encounter.

And data, hard data.

Experience and reason.

Their contagious conviction was grounded in

personal experience

and objective facts that would not go away.

They had encountered the Risen One in deeply personal ways:

they “knew that they knew.”

And they had wrestled with a host of measurable facts.

They came to believe the nonsense new actually happened
because of personal experience
validated by concrete data.

A key term in the faith-vocabulary of the NT is the word “reckon.”

It means to weigh, as in weighing things on a scale.

Like thoughtful 21st century people,
the 1st century people who heard the Easter news
wanted some assurance that the good news is true news.

In their minds, the good news ...

no matter how good it sounds or feels ...

it good only if it is true.

True in every sense of the word.

“Squares with the really real.”

Yes, the early Christians could have sung as we did today,

“You ask me how I know He lives,
He lives within my heart.”

But that was not enough for them.

Every cult of personality could make such an appeal.

“Elvis lives,” she says to me.

“How do you know?” I ask.

“Because I just feel his presence,” she answers;

“and do not bother me with questions of factuality!”

Not so the early Christians.

“We must bother with factuality,” they insisted.

For the subjectively true had to be objectively true

for any of it to be truly true.

So Thomas, one of the first disciples of Jesus.

As I tried to show when I preached for First Baptist at the Orpheum theatre a number of years ago,

Thomas is not a doubter.

He is simply asking the questions that ought to be asked.

Does this experience of Jesus’ presence after His crucifixion

square with the way things actually are?

Is it really the presence of JESUS we experience?

Thomas simply wants to know:

Is the Christ of faith the Jesus of history?

So the first hearers of the Easter news “reckoned.”

They “reckoned” with their experience ...

and with the facts at hand.

Yes, faith in the Resurrected Jesus is a leap.

Faith in anyone or anything is a leap. That is the nature of any kind of faith.

Faith in the Jesus of Easter morning is a leap.

BUT is not a leap in the dark. There are good reasons to take the leap.

The NT never says to anyone, “just believe.”

The NT says,

“look ... here is the data connected to Easter ...

what do you make of it?”

Following good scientific methodology,

the writers of the NT – all initially skeptics –

say to us,

“here are a number of observable **effects**.

What **caused** them?”

Clearly, something extra-ordinary happened to Jesus
the Sunday after He was crucified.

“Reckon” with all the effects around the event.

Does each effect have a different cause?

Or might there be one cause for all the effects?

So, on this Easter morning, let us “reckon” with the data.

No single piece of data, by itself, warrants believing the news.

We need it all the data.

And here is what finally won the first skeptics.

Now here is the key. Along with all the data,

the NT proposes an explanation that accounts for **all** the data.

For all the data!

That is an amazing fact.

One for which any scientist longs –

one explanation for **all** the data before us.

Other proposed explanations of the Easter news

may account for one or two pieces of data ...

but they cannot account for all other pieces.

In fact, some explanations

have to ignore some of the data.

The NT lays out all the effects.

And then accounts for all the effects with **one** cause.

Let me first simply lay out the major facts available to us.

I will then focus on just four critical facts.

Here is the whole package.

1. Jesus had died.
2. Jesus was buried in a tomb belonging to one Joseph of Arimathea.

The civil authorities had records

to substantiate its exact location.

3. Jesus' death had devastated the first disciples.
4. The tomb was sealed by a large stone,
and guards had been stationed around the clock.
5. On Sunday morning the tomb was found to be empty.
6. Except for the grave cloths lying undisturbed.
7. The empty tomb was not by itself proof of the resurrection.

Mary Magdalene's first thought was that
someone had stolen Jesus' body.

8. Some 500 men and women had experiences
which they took to be appearances of the Risen Jesus.

9. First century Judaism had no concept of a dying and rising Messiah.

10. The disciples proclaimed the news in Jerusalem, that is,

within eye-sight of the place where Jesus had been buried.

11. The same devastated disciples became the nucleus of

a movement that within a few years spread throughout the
Roman Empire.

12. And the centre of the Gospel shifted.

From the Kingdom of God to the King.

From the Kingdom of God to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, none of this data “proves” that Jesus is risen.

That is not how it works.

When all is said and done, the Resurrection is still a mystery.

But a mystery that comes to us wrapped in measurable effects.

No one effect, by itself, leads us to embrace the mystery.

It is when all the effects are “reckoned” together

that the NT explanation has merit.

AND the beauty of the NT explanation is that

it accounts for all the effects with one cause.

As I see it, four critical facts beg for “reckoning.”

They are:

1. The empty tomb.
2. The claim by over 500 people that Jesus appeared to them
in bodily form.
3. The transformed lives of those announcing the news.
4. The shift in the centre of the Gospel.

I. Fact one: the tomb was empty.

Jesus’ body was missing on Easter morning.

This is a solid fact of history.

As solid as any other fact taught in the history books.

Indeed, more solid than many.

The tomb was empty.

The entire early Church unanimously testifies to it.

And so did those who did not believe the Gospel.

They reluctantly admitted the fact.

For instance, in a Jewish document of the 2nd century, the *Toledoth Jesu*,

“it is expressly stated that the Jewish authorities themselves
 examined the grave and found it empty”
 (Ethelbert Stauffer, 145).

In our time Dr. Pinchas Lapide,

an Orthodox Jew teaching in various German Universities
 argues that yes, the tomb was empty.

The question, of course, is Why?

Why was it empty?

Various explanations have been advanced.

But each of them, except the NT explanation,
 fails to take into account everything we know.

For example, Matthew, one of the other writers of the Easter story,
 tells how the great Sanhedrin, the Ruling Council, dealt with this fact.

They spread the rumor that some of Jesus’ disciples
 came and stole the body (28:11-15).

This was the official interpretation of Judaism
 for many centuries.

But does it square with all the data?

It fails to take into account the presence of guards
 stationed in the cemetery.

It fails to take into account the huge stone
 blocking access to the grave.

And it fails to take into account motive.

What would the disciples stand to gain
 by stealing Jesus' body?

They were not expecting a resurrection!

They had nothing to prove!

Furthermore, people do not ordinarily risk their lives
 for a lie.

Sorry ... Yes they do ... all the time.

But people do not ordinarily risk their lives
 for what they know to be a lie.

Take another possible explanation for the empty tomb.

Maybe the cemetery gardener stole the body
 and hid it somewhere else. Why?

Because he was afraid that his flower and vegetables would be
 trampled by

the crowds he expected to come and visit

the grave of the dead revolutionary. This
 explanation was seriously argued in the 4th century and the again in the later
 decades of the 20th century.

But how likely is this explanation?

Does it fit all the data available to us?

You see, all the authorities needed to do

was ask the gardener to lead them to Jesus' body.

They could then parade the body around Jerusalem

as the disciples were preaching the resurrection.

There were enough people in the city

who could make positive identification.

Many other explanations for the empty tomb fail at just this point.

The officials could have stomped out the Easter fire

by producing the body.

Or, at least, as Ronald Sider suggests,

“by conducting guided tours to the real burial place

as soon as the disciples claimed Jesus had risen.”

Now, just because the tomb was empty

and the body was missing

does not mean Jesus rose from the dead.

The empty tomb tells us **that** something happened to

Jesus' body; it does not tells us **what** happened.

(George Ladd, 89)

There is one piece of data that does give us a clue to what happened.

The tomb was empty ... except for the grave cloths lying inside.

According to John, yet another writer of the Easter story,

when a few weeks before Easter

Jesus had called His friend Lazarus out of the tomb,

Lazarus came forth still wrapped in the grave cloths.

But in Jesus' case, the grave cloths are left behind,

as if He had simply slipped out of them.

The point?

Lazarus had been resuscitated, Jesus resurrected.

Lazarus would die again.

Resuscitation is a return to life as it is lived before death;

it is a "coming back from the dead." Lazarus
would die again.

Resurrection is a being transformed,

lifted to a different order of life,

an overcoming of death, never to die again.

The fact remains: the tomb was empty, except for the grave cloths.

What is the cause of this effect?

Fact two: Over 500 people claimed that Jesus appeared to them. The New Testament records 12 such experiences by individuals and groups spread over a 40 day period. The apostle Paul begins his proclamation of the Gospel on this note: “for I delivered to you what we received. That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures and that He appeared to more than 500 people at one time, most of whom remain until now. Note the phrase “Most of whom remain until now.” “Now” is about 55AD. Paul is inviting investigation: ”go talk to those folks. Do a CSI number on them. Press them. Check out their psychological profile. What do you make of their experience?”

Now the hard data with which the historians grapple is not that Jesus appeared but that people had an experience they interpret as Jesus appearing. Thus we find a number of other alternative explanations for their experience.

Another theory by a professor at the University of California, Irvine. What was really going on, he argues, is that Jesus had a twin brother who was kept a secret for 30 years who then emerged during all the confusion to take over for his dead brother. The alternative explanation most offered is that the first disciples and the group of 500 were hallucinating. They had so wanted to see Jesus that they projected the wish into ‘reality’. But how well does this explanation fit the other available data? Dr George Ladd observed that ‘subjective vision are real phenomena, but they require a certain conditioning to be experienced. These conditions did not prevail.’ In the lives of the witnesses in question (ibid , p138).

For one thing, 500 people do not hallucinate the same vision. For another, the 12 recorded appearances of Jesus all took place in different circumstances. And for another, and this is critical, those who had experiences were not expecting to meet Jesus. They were not seeking Him. Yes, they missed Him and wished He had not died but they were not expecting to see Him again. The women had gone to the tomb to anoint the body o their dead friend. They expected to see a corpse. Enter the toe disciples on the road to Emmaus were not expecting to see Jesus even though they had heard about the empty tomb (Luke 24:21-24) It is said that the people see what they expect to see. The first witnesses were not expecting to see Jesus.

Furthermore, as C.S. Lewis observed, “any theory of hallucination breaks down on the fact that on three separate occasions the hallucination was not immediately recognized as Jesus.” (Miracles, 115)

Mary Magdalene did not immediately recognize him in the garden she thought He was the gardener (John 20:15). The two disciples on the road to Emmaus did not immediately recognize Him (Luke 24:13-31). Nor did the seven disciples when Jesus stood on the beach washing their fish (John 21:4). There is one more observation about these appearances. The first appearances were not to the male apostles but to women. To women. Now, in the first century, you never built a case around the testimony of women. Sorry, ladies but in that day a woman’s testimony did not count. Indeed, to build a case with women as witnesses would be ‘the kiss of death.’ (Murray Harris, Time 1995) Yet the Gospel reports that the Risen Jesus first appeared to a woman. C.F.D Moule of Cambridge University argues that it is difficult to explain this as a fabrication of the early church for women “were notoriously invalid witnesses according to Jewish principles of evidence”. Why then does the story come to us with women as the first witnesses and preachers of the Resurrection? Because that is the way it happened. The Gospel writers are not making up the story they are telling it the way it was.

Fact two: over 500 people claimed that Jesus appeared to them after His crucifixion. What is the cause of this effect?

Fact three: the wonderfully transformed lives of those who claimed to have seen Jesus. What accounts for their courage in the face of persecution? What accounts for their compassion for those inflicting the pain? What accounts for the total re-orientation of their lives: from devastation to zeal for Christ, from fear to risking everything for Jesus’ Name?

As James, the brother of Jesus. He opposed Jesus during Jesus’ public ministry. He did not believe in His brother (John 7:5). Yet a few weeks after Easter James becomes the leader of the Jerusalem Church. Why? “Why did James oppose Jesus when He was popular in Galilee and then join Jesus’ followers when they were persecuted in Jerusalem?

As the apostle Paul, the former Saul of Tarsus. Here is a man who hated Christians. Who planned the extermination of the Church! He was

convinced that the “Nazarene sect” as he called it, was heretical and should be wiped off the face of the earth. Yet he becomes Christianity’s greatest missionary and theologian. What caused the effect? Listen to the testimony he gave in one of his court appearances.

“I was on my way to Damascus to bring more followers of Jesus as prisoners to be punished. And it came about that as I was on my way... about noontime...a very bright light suddenly flashed around me...and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And He said to me ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene whom you are persecuting” (Act 22:3-8)

Saul’s life was dramatically altered because, he claims, the Jesus whose name he sought to erase from the pages of history is alive.

Fact three: the transformed lives of people. What is the cause of this measureable effect?

Fact four: The centre of the Gospel shifts. This is, for me, the most critical piece of data. What was the Gospel Jesus Himself preached? “the time is fulfilled; the Kingdom of God has come near.” (Mark 1:15) But what was the Gospel the early church preached? “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as you will be saved”. The message shifts from the Kingdom to Jesus. Why?

It is often argued that the words “Jesus is alive” really only mean “Jesus’ cause goes on”. If that is so, why is it that instead of being obsessed with Jesus?

Moses dies but does not become the centre of Jerusalem. The Buddha dies but does not become the centre of Buddhism. Mohammad dies but does not become the centre of Islam. Jesus dies and does become the centre. Why? Jesus preaches “receive the Kingdom” the church preaches “receive Christ”. Jesus calls people “live in the Kingdom” the church calls people to “live in Christ.” Jesus teaches the church to pray, “Thy Kingdom come”, the church prays, “o Lord, you come”. Why? Why this shift from Jesus’ cause to Jesus Himself? Ask those who made the shift. Their answer? He who died in the cause of the Kingdom is not dead. He has risen! He is the Kingdom!

The New Testament lays out the data.

- 1) The tomb was empty
- 2) Over 500 people had experiences, which they took to be encounters with Jesus.
- 3) Their lives were wonderfully transformed
- 4) The centre of the Gospel shifts

The New Testament then asks: What do you make of these effects? And then offers one cause for all the effects. One cause for all the effects. The one cause? He who was crucified on Friday was alive on Sunday. Jesus of Nazareth is risen. He is alive.

And because He is:

- 1) a new age has dawned
- 2) our sins are forgiven
- 3) we are reconciled to the Father
- 4) Evil and death have met their match and are no longer in charge
- 5) History has meaning.

In Jesus the cosmos is going to be fully re-created. Nonsense. Or the only thing that finally makes sense.

To be continued next Sunday.

(until they started investigating the data.

It was nonsense until Peter went to the tomb himself....

That is why people came to believe that the nonsense actually happened.