

We start this morning with breaking news out of Jerusalem. You will hear it here first and not on Channels 4, 7 and 13 or MSNBC, CNN or FOX News. At dawn this morning, a group of women went to the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth and found the stone blocking the entrance rolled away and the tomb empty. The body was nowhere to be found. You will remember that this Jesus was crucified along with two criminals this past Friday. The Jewish religious leaders had sought the death penalty for Him because He claimed to be the Son of God, the long awaited Messiah of the Jewish people. They put political pressure on Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, to convict Jesus and have Him crucified. Pilate reluctantly agreed after they threatened to appeal the case to the Emperor Caesar, and in a dramatic scene right out of a movie, Pilate washed his hands in front of the crowd claiming that Jesus' blood was on the people of Jerusalem and not his responsibility. In a mob mentality, the people accepted full responsibility.

When asked about the empty tomb, the High Priest said that the disciples of Jesus must have come in the middle of the night and stolen the body. When questioned further about how they could do this since he himself had asked Pilate to station Roman soldiers to guard the tomb, had the tomb sealed and rolled a 2,000-pound stone to block the entrance of the tomb, the High Priest was at a loss for an explanation. He walked away from the cameras murmuring that the whole world was turned upside down. There is also a rumor circulating that the High Priest and the Jewish authorities even bribed the Roman guards to keep silent about what really happened. We just got word that we have a reporter on the scene. Let's see what Matthew has to tell us in the twenty-eighth chapter, the first fifteen verses.

Read Matthew 28:1-15

Now maybe that's the way this story might have been reported if they had TV back then. But as any good and credible reporter knows, you better get all your facts right and have the background data to back up your story, especially one as remarkable as this one, or you might be looking for a new job. The first thing a reporter would do is to go to the scene and verify that the tomb was actually empty. There they would find the stone, a very large one, rolled off to the side, and the entrance to the tomb wide open.

Another thing they would notice is that there is no smell of death in the air, as a matter of fact, it smells like lilies, but there are no lilies in sight. You would have expected an odor of decay and death since the body had been in the tomb for three days and those two Pharisees, Joseph and Nicodemus, did not have enough time on Friday afternoon to properly prepare the body for burial since Jesus had died right before the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath when no work

is allowed. That's why the women said that they came to the tomb so early this morning while the men were still sleeping, to finish anointing the body with spices.

As the reporters looked into the empty tomb, they would see that the burial cloths were neatly folded and separated. Their first thought must have been that Jesus' disciples came in the middle of the night and took away the body. But that brings up the question - how did they get past the Roman soldiers guarding the tomb and move the huge stone. And why would they, being in a hurry, take time to fold the cloths? All of this doesn't make sense; there must be more to the story!

The next thing that a reporter would do is to interview any eye witnesses. First there were the women who came just before daybreak. They noted that as they walked to the garden, they were wondering how they were going to roll the heavy stone away from the entrance to the tomb. However, not only did they find that the stone had been rolled away and the tomb empty, but they also saw angels, if you can believe that. The women said that it had to be angels because their clothes shone like lightning. The angels asked them why they were looking for the living among the dead; Jesus was not there, but had risen from the grave as He had told His disciples in Galilee. The women said that then they remembered Jesus telling them that the Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and on the third day rise from the grave. And this is the third day! At the time they didn't understand what He meant, but now they do.

One lady, Mary Magdalene, went on to say that after she and the other women ran to tell Jesus' disciples that the tomb was empty, she returned to the garden hoping to find His body, not realizing what had actually happened. As she sat crying, a man approached her, who she thought was the gardener, and asked her why she was crying. She asked him if he knew where Jesus' body was. Then she said she heard the most wonderful word ever; He called her name "Mary," and then she realized that it was the Lord Himself, and He was alive indeed.

It has also been reported that two of Jesus' disciples, Peter and John, ran to the tomb right after the women told them that it was empty. John, who is known as the Beloved Disciple because of his close relationship to Jesus, being younger got there first, but did not go in; he looked in and saw that the tomb was empty and that the strips of linen used to wrap Jesus' body were laying off to the side neatly folded. Peter, who some say denied knowing Jesus three times on the night that He was arrested, went right into the tomb when he got there and found things just as John did. When later interviewed, Peter said that he went home wondering what had happened. John said that he eventually went into the tomb and that he now believes that Jesus is indeed alive as the women had reported.

The reporters tried to interview the Roman soldiers who had been assigned to guard the tomb and get their take on the story; however, they were unavailable having left right after the story broke for a vacation at a resort on the Mediterranean Sea. Somebody said that they had suddenly come into a lot of money!

Hold on, we have more late breaking news coming into the studio. It appears that Jesus has just appeared to His disciples. An unidentified source says that the disciples, women and other followers were meeting in the Upper Room where they had shared their last meal with Jesus before His arrest and crucifixion, and were discussing the events of the day when Jesus suddenly appeared in the middle of the room even though the doors were locked. The only one missing was a guy named Thomas who is known as the Doubter. The door had been locked for fear that the Jewish authorities might want to crucify one of them in an attempt to diminish the growing enthusiasm among Jesus' followers. They indicated that Jesus' sudden appearance scared the heck out of them; they thought that He was a ghost. But He relieved their fears when He said "Peace be with you," and then He showed them His hands and side. He then asked for some food. I guess that I would be hungry too after spending three days in a dark, cold tomb.

Well, we have more breaking news from our reporter out in the countryside. It appears that Jesus has appeared to two individuals on the road to Emmaus. When we interviewed them, they said that they were headed home after the eventful day in Jerusalem when a man walked right up beside them and joined their conversation. They were surprised that he was not aware of the top news story of the day, if not the century. As they walked on towards Emmaus, they brought Him up-to-date on the latest news. Then to their amazement, He began to explain why all this had to happen based on the prophecies of the Old Testament. His discussion was so exciting that before they knew it they had reached their destination; so they invited Him to stay for supper. Then as He broke the bread their eyes were opened, and they immediately recognized Jesus. But suddenly He disappeared. They added that as they listened to Him explain the scriptures their hearts were burning within them.

And we are still getting confirmations of additional sightings from all over Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside, over 500 of them. You heard it here first; so, it must be true. Jesus Christ is Risen; He is alive; and He is setting the hearts of men and women on fire who believe in Him.

Now this may have been the way that a reporter might have investigated the Resurrection over 2,000 years ago. But can you think of any news story that has been discussed this long throughout history, and that has been subjected to so much scrutiny? This story has been investigated down through the ages as atheists and others have tried their best to prove that it is not true. Skeptics have tried to put Jesus back in the tomb for centuries, but to no avail. One

of the most documented attempts was by a legal journalist for the *Chicago Tribune* named Lee Strobel. Educated in law and journalism, Lee interviewed thirteen leading scholars and authorities from all over the world, asking tough questions about Jesus of Nazareth and the Resurrection. Lee concludes in his book, *The Case for Christ*, that it would actually require more faith for an atheist to maintain their non-belief than it would to trust in Jesus Christ. In addition to being a Christian author, Lee, once an atheist, is now one of Jesus' leading ministers.

One of the individuals that Lee interviewed was Bill Craig, one of the foremost experts on the Resurrection. Mr. Craig referred to a creed of the early Christian Church recorded by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 – “For what I received I passed on to you as first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Peter, and then the Twelve. After that, He appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. He then appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all He appeared to me also.”

Essentially, this creed is a four-line formula. The first line refers to the Crucifixion, the second to the burial, the third to the Resurrection, and the fourth to appearances by Jesus. The empty tomb and the Resurrection are the very linchpins of the Christian faith. Paul tells us later in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians that if Christ has not been raised from the grave, then our faith is worthless, and we are still under the burden of our sins. Christianity without the Resurrection is not simply Christianity without its final chapter; it is not Christianity at all. The Resurrection is proof of Jesus' triumph over sin and death. It is the foreshadowing of the resurrection of all His faithful followers; the promise that all those who believe in Him will experience eternal life with Him. It is the basis of our Christian hope; it is the miracle of all miracles.

Some reporters in the first century probably didn't give Christianity much of a chance of survival. You probably wouldn't have put any money on a ragtag group of people whose primary message was that a crucified carpenter from an insignificant village had triumphed over the grave. Yet it was so successful that today we name our children Peter and Paul, and our dogs Caesar and Nero after the Roman Emperors of that time.

But what does all this mean? What does the empty tomb and cross mean to you? Well, there are several obvious implications. If Jesus is the Son of God, then His teachings are more than just good ideas from a wise teacher; they are divine insights for living our daily lives. If Jesus personally knows the pain and suffering that we experience, then He can comfort and encourage us in the midst of the crises of life that He warned us are certain in a world corrupted by sin. If Jesus loves us as He says, then He always has our best interests at heart. That means we have nothing to lose and everything to gain by committing our life to Him. If Jesus did rise from the dead, then He's still alive today and looking for a personal relationship

with each one of us. If Jesus conquered death, then He has opened the door of eternal life for you and me. And my friends, there are no ifs and buts when it comes to Jesus Christ. All this is true! There is power in the cross and the empty tomb, and it is available to you and to me this morning.

Every day we read about and see news stories on TV, the internet and in the newspapers. We believe some and doubt some. Some we take seriously and others we forget about as quickly as we read them. Some we skim over and others we dig into depending on our interests. But the story of the Resurrection is not one to be taken lightly or to skim over.

As far as I am concerned, I believe with all my heart what we recited earlier in the Apostles' Creed: that Jesus Christ was crucified, dead and buried and that on the third day He rose from the grave defeating the devil and death forever for His faithful followers. I believe that the tomb was empty that Easter morning and because of that, I, as a believer, have been freed through amazing grace from the grip of sin in my life, have the opportunity to have a personal relationship with my Lord and Savior, and to live an abundant life. I have no fear of the grave because it is not my final resting place because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the empty tomb; I will spend eternity with God and my loved ones who have gone before me. What about you, do you believe this with all your heart? Hear the breaking news, the Good News; He is risen, He is risen indeed. Thanks be to God. Amen