

“Jesus Rose from the Dead”

1 Corinthians 15:3-8 and Matthew 28:1-15

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Market Square Presbyterian Church
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I love the chariot scene in Ben Hur. I hold my breath every Easter season as I watch the bad guy trying to tear up the wheels of the good driver's chariot. I wince when I see one driver fall out of a chariot and get run over. Even though I've seen the movie on television Easter after Easter, I still love it.

Do you know the story of the writing of Ben Hur?

Lew Wallace was a general in the Union Army during the Civil War. He was one of the attorneys who participated in the trial after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. Wallace served our nation as the minister to Turkey and later as Governor of the New Mexico Territory. He became most famous, however, for his research to disprove the resurrection of Jesus.

Lew Wallace set out to write a book that would once and for all disprove the Christian claim of the resurrection of Jesus. As an attorney, Wallace thought he could prove from the disciples' accounts that their claim could not hold up in a court of law. Thus, he studied, researched, and analyzed the disciples' version of what happened at the tomb after Jesus was buried.

Lew Wallace knew that the weak link in Christianity is the claim of Jesus' resurrection. Disproving this part of the gospel would cause the entire religion to collapse. He worked years on his research. The resulting book, however, was not the book he set out to write. Instead of rejecting the claims for Jesus' resurrection, Lew Wallace became a Christian, concluding the gospel accounts were true. Lew Wallace, in 1880, wrote the novel *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ*.

This Sunday we examine the line of the Apostles Creed, “he rose again from the dead.” Let us turn this October weekend into a mini-Easter service celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. I invite us to do what Wallace did. Let's review the two opposing accounts of what happened that first Easter. According to Matthew, the guards had one version of the story and the disciples another version. Which story holds up on closer examination?

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from

heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." —Matt. 28:1-15

One of the toughest jobs for a parent is to determine what really happened when our children get into an argument. When Kate and I first faced the situation of our children arguing, we developed a way to resolve sibling disputes. We tried it on the two older children, our boys. When they came running into the room asking us to mete out judgement and settle their argument, we used to stop the argument by sending them to a bedroom. The instructions were: "When you two can come to me with the same story, then I will determine who is right and who is wrong. Until you can come to me with the same story, I don't want to hear it!"

The boys would remain in their room for fifteen minutes to a half-hour trying to agree on what actually happened. By the time they returned to retell the account of what happened, they were calm and able to hear each other's perspective. The judgement that seemed so necessary in the midst of their anger now seemed secondary to the renewed friendship they developed as they worked on a common interpretation of what happened. I do not recall that I ever had to punish either one or the other by the time they had concluded the process of agreeing on what had happened. Increased understanding had resolved the conflict.

When our two younger children, our daughters, became old enough to have similar disagreements, we used the same technique. I once heard one of the boys mumble as I sent the girls to a room to return with an agreed-upon story, "Oh brother! I remember when we used to have to do that!" I think it was about the third time that we sent the girls to a room to return with the same story that they surprised us by returning in less than a minute. They were quick to nod their heads in agreement that the issue was resolved, and they would rather return to playing their game.

Our girls figured out the way around our system. They decided most arguments were not worth wasting time on figuring out who was at fault. It was easier to simply decide on a mutually agreeable story. In fact, they figured it was better to simply make up a story which they both found agreeable than to work on resolving the different views of what really happened. Our daughters learned to concoct a contradiction-free story, even if it had nothing to do with the truth.

What do we look for in determining which to believe, the disciples or the guards? At first one might think that complete agreement is good when it comes to people telling the truth. If all the witnesses agree, then it must be true, right? However, it is my experience that an account that has no contradictions is more suspicious as being rehearsed and doctored.

The guards' version of Easter has no contradictions. "We were asleep and the disciples came and stole the body." This account appears believable at first. However, comparing it with what we know of real life, it becomes suspect as having been too rehearsed. It sounds like an alibi intended for damage control. Any attorney would want to ask the obvious question, "If you were asleep, how do you know it was his disciples?"

In contrast, the Easter story as recorded in the gospels has numerous discrepancies. Matthew, Mark and Luke record the events of the early morning. John records the events later that day. Pretending to be Lew Wallace, an attorney attempting to refute the story of Jesus' resurrection, we could begin by asking who went to the tomb that morning. Matthew writes about two women, Mary and Mary. Mark says there were three women, "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome." Luke does not directly answer the question. Instead, he describes the women who rushed to tell the rest of the disciples what they had seen. "Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles." Their testimonies do not agree.

Continuing the role of a trial lawyer cross-examining the witnesses, we could ask, "How many angels were there at the tomb?" Some of the gospel writers give us one angel, others two angels. Some say the angels were outside the tomb, others say the angels were inside the tomb. Discrepancies.

What exactly did the angels say? Again, we have numerous discrepancies. A superficial review of the gospels reveals numerous discrepancies in the accounts. The question is what to do with this information. I am sure that Lew Wallace must have been tempted to draw the conclusion that it disproved the resurrection of Jesus. However, on deeper reflection he realized that it might very well be evidence that the testimonies of the gospels are actual eyewitness accounts. While the early church might have resolved the discrepancies by agreeing on one official version of the resurrection, they left the four gospel accounts raw and unrehearsed.

Numerous modern studies prove that actual eyewitness accounts frequently disagree in a variety of details. Particularly when the event is particularly emotional and shocking. This was even more true in the ancient days before cell phone videos and CCTV videos that could be reviewed for more factual information.

For ten years in Seminary and Alaska I had a full beard. I shaved it only twice from my mid-twenties through my mid-thirties. The first time I shaved it was for my grandmother. She hated my beard and insisted on commenting on it regularly. Her father had worn a full beard and she hated his as well. In fact, while I was in seminary she offered to pay me \$100 if I would shave. I decided to take her up on her offer. One afternoon I showed up at her house clean-shaven. To my amazement my grandmother did not even mention the fact that I had shaved.

My mother stopped by that evening to visit with my grandmother. "Did Bruce surprise you when he stopped by today?" My grandmother expressed her happiness that we had enjoyed a very nice visit while I am home from seminary. My mother asked what she thought of my shaving. She insisted that I had not shaved. My grandmother insisted my mother was wrong and that I had not shaved. I had to return the next day to show her again before she would pay me.

I shaved my beard off a few months before we moved from Alaska back to Arizona. Our children were ages two to eight. They had only known me with a beard. I had heard that it could traumatize children if their father shaves after they have known him only with a beard. The day I decided to shave, I went into the living room and told the children that I was about to shave my beard. Busily playing games, they barely responded. I returned after having taken the first step of trimming the beard very close to the skin. Now watching television, three of them barely nodded at me. One, however, followed me back to the bathroom and watched as I completed the process of shaving. As I dried my face he began to cry. He choked out the words, "I know you are my daddy, but you don't look like my daddy anymore."

My grandmother had not even noticed; my child cried. Colleagues and friends asked, "Did you cut your hair differently?" "You've lost weight!" It was amazing how differently people responded to something as minor as shaving a beard.

If after each shave we had interviewed family and friends about what happened, there would have been different responses. He changed his hair, his weight, etc. This is normal for real witnesses. When they have not met together and compared notes ahead of time, their accounts will likely have some contradictions.

There is more than one way to interpret the empty tomb. Perhaps the body was stolen. This is what the guards insisted happened. On the other hand, what if the disciples were right? I find their accounts more compelling because they were willing to leave the discrepancies.

It is amazing that the first Christians could disagree on so many details and yet come to the same conclusion. Something real had happened. They claimed they met the risen Lord. The greatest evidence was that their lives were changed as a result. In fact, nearly all of them were persecuted and died barter deaths refusing to change their stories of the resurrection.

This is my witness as well. I believe the disciples not only because their raw, unrehearsed testimonies ring true. Not only because they paid a high price to share their testimonies. I believe the disciples' version because since I've met Jesus, my life continues to be transformed by his powerful love.

Who are you going to believe, the guards or the disciples?