

That's Our Story (and We're Sticking to It)

In a news story from Waterloo, Iowa, charges of tampering with records were filed this past week against a middle-aged woman and her man-friend who decided back in December that they needed a few days off from work. So, they filed a fake obituary with the *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier*, saying the woman's 17-year-old son had died after a lengthy illness. Officials said that later in the week, people who knew the family saw the teenager at a restaurant and called authorities.

I say they gave up too easily. Why didn't Mom just fold her hands, look reverently skyward and say, "It's a miracle!" Why doesn't she keep claiming "resurrection" until someone proves otherwise? Why doesn't she just insist to her dying breath, "That's my story, and I'm sticking to it."

The answer is obvious. Resurrection is a hard sell. Such a story would break down if no witnesses or documentation are brought forth to support the fact that the deceased had indeed been dead. The reason people struggle to believe the miracle of the Resurrection of Jesus is not because it fails to meet the criteria of documented history or eye-witness testimony. If we cannot trust the history surrounding the first Easter morn, there is no history beyond our own experience that we can trust. Ah, but there's the real issue. We don't have much experience with dead things coming back to life.

I find that fascinating. Every poll I read says that the majority of Americans, in some way, shape or form, believe in God. That inclination is part of our human fabric. And yet, in some people's desire to avoid the smirks of the so-called "wise" of this world, those same people struggle with the notion that this supernatural God could intervene in human history by sending a Savior to us, by allowing Him to die as the just penalty due our sins and by raising that Rescuer from the dead as a showcase of His power over death and as an assurance that He can do the same thing for us. Friend, if you can believe in God at all, there is more than adequate history to trust that He raised Jesus from the dead.

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With the exception of a few minor revisions, the following manuscript comes from E.V. Hunt's "*The Crucifixion.*"

Everyone in Jerusalem was on edge the day Christ died. A strange darkness had occurred at midday. An earthquake shook the city. In the temple, an enormous veil, 60 feet wide by 30 feet tall, separated the Holy of holies from the holy place. It was woven in 72 squares, each the thickness of a man's hand. When Jesus died, that veil tore from the top down. Such news would circulate quickly.

The priests wanted the bodies off the crosses and buried before sundown. Jewish days began in the evening, at the appearance of the third star. This sundown would mark a very special Sabbath, the beginning of the *Week of Unleavened Bread*. No burials were allowed during the Sabbath, and the Law said that if a body was left hanging on a tree overnight, the entire land would be desecrated.

The Romans had a method to hasten the death of a crucified man. It was called *crurifracture*. The *lector*, a man expertly trained in matters of torture and crucifixion, would take an iron bar called a *crucifragium* and break the victim's lower legs. He could no longer push against the lower nails and raise himself so as to assist his breathing. He quickly asphyxiated. The Romans ordered the *crurifracture*, but Numbers 9:12 said that a Passover Lamb's legs were not to be broken. Jesus knew this, so He willed His death. The soldiers affected the *crurifracture* on the thieves, but when they came to Jesus, He was already dead. And, if this professional *lector* said He was dead, He was dead.

But, just to make doubly sure that Jesus was dead, a soldier thrust a spear into His side. John says that "blood and water" flowed forth. The spear probably pierced the right auricle of the heart. It is engorged with blood, so blood would flow even though the human body cannot profusely bleed after death because the heart is not pushing blood. The water could have come either from gastric juices that filled the abdomen when the stomach herniated or from serum in the pericardium around the heart which would have built up during the distress on the heart brought on by crucifixion.

Jesus had a few friends in high places. One was Joseph of Arimathea, a border-town near Samaria. A member of the Sanhedrin, he was a "secret disciple" of Jesus. He was joined by Nicodemus, the pharisee who came to Jesus by night. The two men asked Pilate for permission to bury the body. Normally, criminals were tossed over Jerusalem's southeast wall, still nailed to the *patibulum*, the horizontal bar of the cross, onto the perpetually burning trash-heap in the *Valley of Gehenna*, which Jesus often used to paint a picture of Hell.

Joseph and Nicodemus assumed the unpleasant task of disengaging the corpse from the cross. Numbers 19:11 says that anyone who touched a corpse was defiled for seven days. These two men would be eliminated from participating in the *Week of Unleavened Bread*. This sacrificial expression of love and loyalty exposed whatever secrecy had previously typified their allegiance.

Christ died at three in the afternoon. There were only three hours left until sundown. About one hundred pounds of aloes mixed with myrrh were spread out on a linen shroud, and the body was wrapped with the linen. The Jews did not embalm like the Egyptians. The spices combated the odor of decay. Nicodemus paid for the spices. Joseph purchased the linen shroud and provided a tomb.

The poor buried underground, but the rich carved tombs in the sides of hills. Inside these tombs, shelves were carved to receive bodies of family members. They dug a trench at the cave's entrance, and set a large round millstone in the trench. They would roll the stone uphill in the trench and wedge it. When the body was in place, the wedge was removed and the stone rolled into the trench, sealing the tomb. Such stones still exist. Most weigh about one ton. They were not intended to be easily moved, but only when it was time to bury another family member. This tomb had never been used.

After Jesus died, most of His disciples left. Two women stayed: Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph. They followed Nicodemus and Joseph to the tomb, keeping their distance because of social conventions since the two men were high-ranking officials. Jesus was laid in the tomb. The wedge was removed from under the millstone, closing the tomb. Then, they departed to their homes before the appearance of the third star and the start of the new Sabbath.

The disciples observed this Sabbath. The chief priests and the Pharisees did not. They went to Pilate, pagan who they would ordinarily have nothing to do with on such a holy day, and said, "Sir, we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days, I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he was raised from the dead." Pilate granted them a Roman guard. They also put an official seal where the millstone touched the tomb. Jesus became the first man in history to be guarded to keep Him in His grave.

The following sundown, at the end of the Sabbath, the women prepared to go out the next morning and anoint the body of Jesus, an expression of devotion much like placing flowers on a grave. Mary Magdalene, the other Mary and Salome bought spices as soon as the third star appeared, marking the end of the Sabbath. Shops opened for post-Sabbath shoppers and remained open a few hours into the night. After buying the spices, they waited until morning to go to the tomb. They knew nothing about the guard or the seal. Their chief concern was finding someone to help them move the stone.

During the night, an earthquake occurred when an angel of the Lord rolled the stone away from the entrance of the tomb and sat on it. Who on earth or in hell was going to ask him to move? Whether or not this was the precise point when Jesus exited the tomb, we do not know. The Resurrection is cloaked in mystery. The point of the angel was to showcase an empty tomb. We do know what happened to the guards. The earth shook and an angel moved the stone. They passed out cold.

When the guards came to, they chose not to fight. Seemed prudent, did it not? They ran to the priests to report what happened. For now, the priests bribed the guards to say that the disciples stole the body while they slept. Sleeping on duty could be a capital offense in Rome's eyes, but the priests promised to keep the guards out of trouble. They had already proven they had leverage over Pilate. He did not wish to crucify Jesus in the first place, but they had subtly threatened to go over his head by challenging whether or not he was really a "friend of Caesar."

None of the disciples knew about any of this when the women left for the tomb. Mary Magdalene got there first, before dawn. The other women arrived after sunrise. Upon seeing the open tomb, Mary Magdalene immediately suspected grave robbery and bolted to tell the disciples. In the meantime, the other women arrived. The tomb was open, so they moved closer.

The angel appeared. He looked like a young man. The women bowed their faces to the ground. He said to them: "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him." They entered the tomb and saw another angel who asked the most exhilarating question in the Bible, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" Then, the first angel said, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter ..." Did you ever notice that? Jesus was tenderly thinking of the disciple who denied Him. What grace! The angel spoke of an important meeting to take place in Galilee. The women ran back to the disciples with both fear and great joy at one and the same time.

"Hysterical females," was the first reaction of the disciples to the women's stories.. Mary Magdalene was going on about grave robbers. The others spoke of angels and an empty tomb. Peter and John ran to the tomb to investigate, but God had removed His angels. John outran Peter, but both found only linens where a body should be. This was not the work of a grave-robber. What thief would unwrap a body, leave the very expensive linens and take a naked corpse? Besides, the face-cloth was neatly folded, as if no one was in any hurry. John knew what had happened. Peter wasn't so sure as they left the tomb.

A weeping Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb, and looked in. The angels were back. One was sitting at the head and the other at the foot of where Jesus had been laid. They must have appeared as men, for no terror is recorded. They asked why she was weeping. She still had grave-robbers on the brain. She turned and saw Jesus but did not recognize Him through her tears. She assumed He was the gardener. He asked why she was weeping, but He also knew what else to ask, "Whom are you seeking?" She thought that, perhaps, this gardener had moved the body, so she asked Him.

Then, Jesus called Mary by name. Even if her eyes were teary, her ears were fine. She cried out (you might have too), "Rabboni!" He said something very precious: "Go tell my **brothers**, "I am returning to my Father and **your** Father, to my God and **your** God." He had always called them His disciples. The night before He died, he called them His friends. Now, the important business was "finished." They were now His **brothers**. His Father was *their* Father.

Jesus had delivered Mary Magdalene from seven demons, and her expressions of love for Him were unmatched by those of any other disciple. She remained at Golgotha the longest. She purchased spices for Him as soon as the Sabbath had ended. She was the first at the tomb on Sunday morning, and she tarried there the longest. There were many reasons for the resurrected Jesus to grant to this loving disciple His first appearance. Later, Jesus appeared to the other women when they were together. They just fell to pieces. I suppose that at this point, a meaningful conversation with anyone was going to be tough. Jesus calmed them and told them to also go and inform His disciples.

About noon that same day, two of the little band of Jesus' disciples had heard the story of the women seeing the angels. That's all they knew. They headed back toward their home village of Emmaus, seven miles out in the country. Jesus came up to them on the road, but He did something different. He held their eyes. Cleopas and his companion did not recognize Jesus. Why did He do that? Maybe, it was because so far, people were just falling apart when they saw Him. Sooner or later, He had to talk substance to somebody. He fell in step with them and asked, "What are you guys talking about?"

Cleopas was as amazed as he was sad. "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" Jesus answered, "Things? What things?" Cleopas couldn't believe this guy, but he told the stranger the whole story. "We thought Jesus might be the Redeemer, but our leaders killed Him. Now, His tomb is open and His body is gone. Our women think they've seen angels. Nobody's making a lick of sense. Where have you been, in a cave?"

Then Jesus said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" Then, He thoroughly explained the Scriptures to them. We know He was gripping. Later, Cleopas would say, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" When they arrived at Emmaus, they invited Jesus to stay. Cleopas provided a meal. Like any good Jew, he was getting ready to say a blessing, but like He owned the place, the Stranger broke the bread, blessed it and gave it to the others. Their eyes were opened. They recognized Jesus, and then ... He vanished - probably, before they fell apart.

Would you lay down and go to sleep after that? They ran back to Jerusalem to alert the disciples. It would have been well into the evening before they arrived. The house where the disciples were gathered was locked. Annas, the old political boss in Jerusalem wanted to know who these disciples were. They let the two men in, but the disciples already knew Jesus was alive. At some point, He had appeared to Peter. We know nothing of this appearance, but Paul confirms it in *I Corinthians 15*. Peter fell before the eyes of all Christendom. Jesus appeared to Peter privately and restored Him.

Suddenly, they became aware of a presence. Strange, the door was locked. When they saw Jesus, they thought He was a ghost. He greeted them, "*Peace be with you.*" They fell apart too. Why break the pattern? He showed them His wounds. He showed them that He was flesh and bone. They still didn't believe. Jesus asked for food. Ghosts don't eat, but Jesus ate. Again Jesus said, "*Peace be with you.*" I suspect that this time, it took. Then, just as the Creator had breathed life into the man He had fashioned, Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Thomas missed this gathering and did not believe his friends. The phrase, "Doubting Thomas" was coined. Is that fair? The other disciples had not believed the women. Thomas insisted that he would never believe until He had personally examined Jesus' wounds. A week later, Jesus appeared again - just for Thomas. He knew what Thomas demanded, and He invited the disciple to examine His wounds as closely as he needed to. The offer itself was adequate. "My Lord and my God," he said.

All the disciples were now on the same page. They ventured to Galilee where a time and place had been designated for a meeting with Jesus. In the meantime, seven of them went fishing. Fishing is done at night on the Sea of Galilee. They fished through the night and caught nothing. A man on the distant shore called out, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. He said, "Try one more time - on the right side." They did, and suddenly they had more fish in their nets than they could haul in. Strange, they had seen this miracle before. John said to Peter, "It's the Lord." That's all it took for Peter to jump into the water and head to Jesus. The rest followed, dragging the net full of fish.

When they got to shore, Jesus had a fire going. They ate breakfast together. After breakfast, Jesus asked Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these." Peter said, "Lord, I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Jesus asked this three times. It hurt Peter's feelings, but three times was necessary. Peter had denied Jesus three times. After all, Jesus was now entrusting to Peter His most important possessions, His loved ones.

A mountain had been designated for the meeting. Most scholars believe this is when the appearance to five hundred recorded by Paul occurred. Jesus told them, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Jesus sent the disciples back to Jerusalem where He taught them more fully about salvation by faith. When the day came to say "Good-bye," Jesus led them to the Mount of Olives and gave them their final marching orders. Then, He simply ascended from the earth and vanished into the clouds. Clouds, to the Jews, symbolized the presence of God. This was a powerful departure.

The disciples gaped at the sky - Understandable. As they stood staring, two angels appeared and asked, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." With those words, the story ends. Or, should I say, the story has just begun. The Lord Jesus Christ conquered death, He lives still and He is coming back again.

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"Hallucinations!" the scoffers cry. But, modern hallucinations appear only to certain kinds of people. Jesus appeared to all kinds of people - men, women, small groups and large groups. Hallucinations occur for any given person at the same time of day under similar circumstances. Jesus mixed things up. Hallucinations don't just stop, but Jesus enacted a distinct farewell.

We hear many opponents of Christianity try to explain away that historical event known as the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Sadly, others who call themselves Christian are just as enthusiastic about dismissing a literal resurrection in favor of something more symbolic. None of those ideas explain why the very same people who were moping around in sorrow over Jesus, whom they saw dead and knew to be dead, were later willing to lay down their lives for the Gospel of a living Savior. None of the theories that malign the historical Resurrection can explain the powerful transformation that He has brought to the lives of myriads of believers through the centuries. No, the eye-witnesses and human history cry out in favor of the fact that Jesus was dead and is now alive forevermore.

That's our story, and we're sticking to it!