

Why Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus

Rich Nathan
March 22-23, 2008
Easter Weekend
Matthew 28:1-17

Last year a video of Lauren Caitlin Upton gained worldwide notoriety on YouTube and the late night talk shows. You probably saw Lauren. She was the very pretty Miss South Carolina Teen USA in 2007. She was asked the question:

Recent polls have shown a fifth of Americans can't locate the US on a world map. Why do you think this is?

And here was Lauren's answer:

I personally believe that US Americans are unable to do so because, uh, some, people out there in our nation don't have maps and, uh, I believe that our, uh, education like such as, uh, South Africa and, uh, the Iraq, everywhere like such as, and, I believe that they should, our education over here in the US should help the US, uh, or uh, should help South Africa and should help the Iraq and the Asian countries, so we will be able to build up our future, for our [children].

Now, I don't want to pick on poor Lauren. How many of you have ever watched Jay Leno's "Jay Walking" where Jay Leno goes out onto the street and asks ordinary Americans pretty simple questions such as:

What is Candidate Obama's first name?

He asked that just a few weeks ago. The answer was:

Bill

Bill Obama. Another person said, "I don't know, but I think Oprah knows."

Maybe you've seen the show "Are you smarter than a fifth grader." Kellie Pickler, who was a contestant on American Idol and who is now touring with Rascal Flats and making millions of dollars, was a contestant on that show for charity. She was asked the question:

Budapest is the capital of what European country?

To which Kellie responded:

I don't know. I thought Europe was a country.

Then she went on to say:

Europe is not a country? Oh I don't know? Budapest? Don't they speak French there?

And then she said:

Is France a country?

I was a history major in college, but it seems like most Americans have spent a lot of time singing Sam Cooke's "Don't know much about history..."

The ignorance of history

Listen to these survey stats:

- More than 40% of Americans don't know the name of the United State's National Anthem.
- 30% of Americans are unable to name the current Vice President of the United States, Dick Cheney.
- 25% of Americans said that Columbus sailed to the New World after 1750.

I love these exam answers written by history students. Listen to this:

Abraham Lincoln became American's greatest Precedent. Abraham Lincoln's mother died in infancy, and he was born in a log cabin which he built with his own hands. Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves by signing Emasculation Proclamation.

How about this answer:

Gravity was invented by Issac Walton. It is chiefly noticeable in autumn when the apples are falling off the trees.

Or how about this one:

Johann Bach wrote a great many musical compositions and had a large number of children. In between, he practiced on an old spinster which he kept in his attic. Bach died from 1750 to the present. Bach was the most famous composer in the world and so was Handel. Handel was half German, half Italian, and half English. He was very large.

The value of history

Thomas Jefferson, the author of our Declaration of Independence was a passionate believer in education as the cornerstone of democracy. He once wrote:

If a nation expects to be both ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.

James Madison, who was the Father of the US Constitution, wrote:

A well-instructed people alone can be permanently a free people.

And the great Roman orator, Cicero, said:

To remain ignorant of things that happened before you were born is to remain a child.

This weekend we're celebrating Easter which is a commemoration of the most important fact of history – the fact of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Why is the resurrection the most important fact of history? Let me mention two things:

First, the resurrection makes Christianity unique among the world's religions. In the global village that we live in people increasingly ask the question, "What's the difference between Christianity and all the other religions of the world?"

The answer is very simple: Christianity is the only religion in the world that stands or falls on whether its founder was raised from the dead. No Buddhist claims that Buddha rose from the dead. No Jew claims that Abraham was raised from the dead. His bones are buried in the land of Israel. No Muslim claims that Mohammed rose from the dead. According to tradition, Mohammed died in 632 AD at the age of 61 and his tomb is visited annually by thousands of devout Muslims as they make their pilgrimages to Medina. The bones of Confucius, Lao-Tzu and Zoroaster are still here. Only Jesus rose from the dead and is alive today changing people's lives.

The second reason why the resurrection is the most important fact of history is that today people pick and choose what they like about Christian teaching. People say, "Well, I like this part of Christian teaching, but I can't accept that part. I like this doctrine, but I can't accept that doctrine. I like God's love, but I can't believe in God's judgment."

As Pastor Tim Keller of Redeemer's Church in New York City put it:

If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all he said. If he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said?

In other words, if Jesus rose from the dead, he is in a category of one and has unique authority of everyone who ever lived. You need to pay attention to him. And if he didn't rise from the dead, then we can go merrily on our way and not give another thought to what some 1st century Galilean rabbi thought about life.

History matters. Facts matter. Truth matters. What happened or didn't happen to Jesus matters.

So today, this Easter, I would like us to consider the historical basis for the resurrection in a message I've titled *Why Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus*. Let's pray.

I've been speaking about the resurrection as a fact of history. It is important to understand what we mean when we say the resurrection is a fact of history because there are many

Cheap substitutes for history

Some people think that the words "Jesus is risen from the dead" simply means the memory of Jesus lives on in the hearts of his followers as a great influence just as the memory of Dr. King and his words, or Mohammed and his followers continue to hold sway over millions of people. When we speak of resurrection we are not talking about the memory of Jesus continuing to live on in the hearts of his followers. Jesus continues to have influence in the hearts of his followers because of an objective historical event. He was dead and he rose from the dead. Here is what we read in Luke 24:36-39:

Luke 24:36-39

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. 38 He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

And this story of Jesus rising from the dead is not just a myth. N.T. Wright, one of the foremost New Testament scholars, wrote a massive study of all of the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ in a book titled, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. We have some copies of it in our bookstore. Wright surveys every religious text of the ancient world before the time of Jesus. And we find in religious texts from Egypt to Norway stories of dying and rising gods and goddesses that function with the seasons of nature, the endless cycle of seed time and harvest, fall and spring.

But as N.T. Wright points out in his massive study of every religious story before the time of Jesus, there is no story in the entire history of the world that speaks of a literal resurrection of a human being from the dead - a human being who died and now lives forever in a transformed body. The resurrection of Jesus is a unique story in the history of the world. There is nothing like it. It is not a myth. It is not merely a continuing influence in the life of his followers. It is an objective fact of history open to the normal methods of historical research that we employ when studying such things as the Civil War, or the Presidency of George Washington, or the sailing of Christopher Columbus to the New World. The resurrection of Jesus is a fact of history.

Now why do followers of Jesus allege this? Where's the proof that the resurrection of Jesus is a fact of history? Turn with me to Matthew 28:1-10:

Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. 2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. 4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. 5 The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." 8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Now one of the strangest things about the New Testament report of the resurrection of Jesus is that all four gospels, that is all four biographies of Jesus, report that the first eye-witnesses of his resurrection were women.

Matthew 28:1

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

So in assessing the historicity of the resurrection we are immediately confronted by

The unusual fact of women as chief witnesses

Now in the 21st century you might ask, "Why is it particularly strange that women are the chief witnesses? How does that fact tilt towards underlying the credibility of the report of the resurrection? What's so unusual about that?"

But you need to understand that 1st century Israel, indeed the 1st century Near Eastern and the entire Greco Roman world of the 1st century, was not egalitarian. If you were going to make up a story of a man rising from the dead in the 1st century and you wanted to have eye-witnesses testify to that story, the last people in the world that you would have as eye-witnesses in that society were women. Women were not permitted to testify in a legal proceeding in Judaism. In fact, one of the ancient rules, Judaism said this,

From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex.

Women were regarded in the same way that we would regard children today – as people who had no legal standing because of their lack of education. Men believed that women were likely to easily be deceived. They were considered unreliable and flighty.

And not only do the four gospels have women as the first eyewitnesses, but all four gospels mention Mary Magdalene in particular as the first eyewitness. In Matt. 28.1,

Matthew 28:1

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

And then in verses 8-10:

Matthew 28:8-10

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

This is the same Mary Magdalene, who the Bible tells us had seven demons expelled from her, in Luke 8:2:

Luke 8:2

and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out;

You know, one of the things that gives credibility to the gospel accounts is that the gospels do not gloss over or whitewash the weaknesses or embarrassing details of the lives of the early church’s leaders. There is no airbrushing of the accounts. We find Peter, an early church leader and hero, denying Jesus three times. We find the apostle John, an early church leader and hero, wanting to call down lightning to destroy people that the church later on was trying to reach. We find the leaders of the early church vying for position. We find them being ambitious. We find them being fearful and faithless. We find all things that the critics of Christianity would be able to use against this fledgling faith. “Look at your leaders. How can you follow people like that?” the critics said.

And yet the biographies of Jesus found in the gospels simply tell it like it is. And the reason that this story of women being the first eyewitnesses was included in the gospel accounts is because that’s what happened. The story wasn’t told to win friends and influence people. In fact, in the first few centuries the fact that women were the first eyewitnesses was regularly used as a reason to discredit Christianity by Christianity’s critics. Even the followers of Jesus had difficulty with this because they were hearing it from women. And we read that in the gospels in Luke 24:9-10:

Luke 24:9-11

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

So there was no possible advantage to this new faith that we today call Christianity for reporting the story the way it was told except that that's what happened.

And let me say something parenthetically about Christianity and its relationship to women. One of the saddest results of 21st century Americans' complete ignorance of history is that books like *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown can come along and persuade millions of people that older religions and paganism were far more positive towards women than Christianity was. It is alleged that earlier religions were egalitarian and Christianity came along and imposed this male-dominated, oppressive culture on women. Nothing could be further from the facts. There has been no force in the history of the world that has lifted up the status of women more than Christianity. It was common in the 1st century Greco Roman world for the Romans to throw new infant girls out on to the street to die of exposure because of the low status of women in their society. The church forbade its members from allowing infant girls to be killed. That's what ended female infanticide in the Western World.

Greco Roman society also saw no value in unmarried women. Therefore, it was illegal for a widow to go more than two years without remarrying. Christianity was the world's first religion that permitted widows to remain single. It said, in fact, you don't have to remarry and it may be better for you to not to remarry. Roman widows lost control of their husbands' estates, but the church said when a man died his property went to his wife.

I could point to a dozen other things, but what we have here in the story of the resurrection, this unusual fact – at least for 1st century hearers, was that women were the first eyewitnesses.

And then we have the undeniable fact,

The undeniable fact of the empty tomb

Look with me at Matt 28:5-6:

Matthew 28:5-6

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

The angel invited the women to look into the inner burial chamber.

Matthew 28:6

He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

The gospel writer, John, records that the linen cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' body was left as if Jesus had passed right through it. The handkerchief was still rolled up in the shape of a head and it was about the right distance from the wrappings that had enveloped the body. Jesus had lain in the place that the angel pointed to, but the body of Jesus was no longer there. The tomb was empty.

One of the towering legal scholars of the 20th century was Cambridge-educated, Sir Norman Anderson. He lectured at Princeton University; he was offered a professorship for life at Harvard University; he served as the Dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of London. And after a lifetime of analyzing the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, Sir Norman Anderson said this:

The empty tomb, then, forms a veritable rock on which all rationalistic theories of the resurrection has dashed themselves in vain.

What he is saying is that every alternative to believing in the resurrection has to contend with this one indisputable fact of history – that the tomb of Jesus is empty! The disciples could not have preached the resurrection in Jerusalem if the tomb had not been empty.

You know, one of the most amazing facts about the early Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection was that it originated in the very city where Jesus was crucified. The Christian faith did not come into existence in some distant city far from where the eyewitnesses knew about Jesus' death and burial. It came into being in the very city where Jesus was publicly crucified under the very eyes of its enemies. And if the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection was false, then all the Jews would have had to do to nip this Christian heresy in the bud was to have dug up the corpse of Jesus, parade it through the streets for all to see, and say, "Here's you resurrected Messiah – dead – just as we left him on the cross!"

Even the earliest Jewish propaganda against the Christians presupposes the empty tomb. In Matt 28:11-15 we read this:

Matthew 28:11-15

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. 12 When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, 13 telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So the soldiers took

the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

Now this last line in verse 15:

Matthew 28:15

So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

...reveals that Matthew, at least, was concerned to refute a widespread Jewish explanation of the resurrection. What were some Jewish people saying in response to the proclamation that Jesus was risen? Were they saying these men were liars, they were drunk? Jesus is still in the hillside and you can still go visit where his body is buried?

No! They were saying that the disciples stole away his body. We'll talk about that in a minute, but think about this with me. The earliest propaganda by the critics of Christianity said that the disciples stole away Jesus' body. They didn't deny the empty tomb. But they tried to explain away the empty tomb. There is this stubborn indisputable fact of history that the tomb of Jesus was empty.

Even contemporary Jewish scholars, who have looked at this matter, have conceded the point. Again, quoting from N.T. Wright:

In 1st century Judaism it was the practice that somewhere between six months and two years after a burial took place the tomb would be reopened and the bones of the buried person would be put reverently inside of an ossuary.

It was a burial box. And the reason people did this was because they would reuse the caves over and over for burials. So they would put the bones in a smaller burial box and either put them back in the cave, or some other place. But history is absolutely silent about this second step in the burial of Jesus – the placing of his bones in an ossuary because his body was raised from the dead!

And while pilgrimages are regularly made to visit John Kennedy's grave and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and Mohammed's tomb, no one in history has ever visited the tomb of Jesus believing that his body was still there.

So, we have the unusual fact of women as chief witnesses; the undeniable fact of the empty tomb, and

The utterly unlikely fact that the disciples stole the body

In Matthew 26:57-66:

Matthew 26:57-66

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. 58 But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. 59 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. 60 But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward 61 and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.' " 62 Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" 63 But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." 64 "You have said so," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." 65 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. 66 What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered.

Let me share with you what the tomb of Jesus looked like. As archeologists have excavated 1st century tombs, they discovered that Matthew's account is spot on in its description of a 1st century tomb. There was a slanted groove that led down to a low entrance and a very large disc-shaped stone was rolled into the groove and lodged in place across the door. And then a smaller stone was used to secure the disc. And so while it would be pretty easy to roll the large stone down into the groove, it would take several men to roll the stone out of the groove and away from the entrance to the cave.

Now, this tomb was secure for two reasons:

First, it was a capital offense in the Roman world to tamper with a tomb. Any grave robber who came along to steal the body – whether a friend of Jesus, or an enemy of Jesus would have been taking their lives into their own hands. And it is clear from Matthew's report and also in Matthew 28:11-15 that guards were posted.

Matthew 28:11-15

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. 12 When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, 13 telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

So think about this with me. Let's work this through. Is this story about guards being posted historically accurate?

Christians were running around saying, “Jesus is risen from the dead,” and some of the Jewish critics responded and said, “No! The disciples stole the body.” So the Christians responded and said, “that’s not possible. There were guards posted by the tomb.” The Jewish critics responded and said, “but the guards fell asleep.” And the Christians replied and said, “No, the leaders bribed the guards to say that they fell asleep.”

In Lee Strobel’s book *The Case for Christ* (if you are looking for one great book that lays out the evidence for the resurrection in a very readable form, you might want to pick up *The Case for Christ* in the bookstore today to give to a friend), if there weren’t any guards, if this whole story was made up, the exchange would have sounded like this. In response to the claim that Jesus was risen, the Jewish critics would have said, “The disciples stole his body.” The Christians would have said, “But the guards would have prevented it.” The Jewish critics would have responded, “What guards? There were no guards.”

But nowhere in 1st century history do we read any Jewish critic of Christianity saying that there were no guards. This whole story is fabricated. The critics tried to explain what happened to the guards, but there were guards.

So here we’re left with this story. Did the disciples steal away the body of Jesus?

Again, it is our ignorance of history that keeps us 21st century Americans from recognizing the absurdity of the claim that the disciples somehow would have stolen away the body of Jesus. Because for the first 3 centuries of Christianity’s existence there was absolutely no advantage economically, socially, legally, or physically to being a Christian. The only thing that the disciples could look forward to by this claim that they had seen Jesus risen was social rejection, economic disaster through the boycotting of their businesses, physical torture and often death.

Roman history tells us that during Nero’s persecution about 30 years after Christ’s death, Christians were clothed in the skins of wild beasts and thrown to dogs to be eaten. Other Christians were smeared with tar and used as human torches to illuminate the night as Nero rode around Rome in his chariot and viewed the spectacle of Christians on fire.

There was no political advantage for the early Christians to make up a story that they saw Jesus risen from the dead. There was no economic advantage; there was no social advantage.

A few centuries ago a man named William Paley was writing about the resurrection and he said this:

Would men in such circumstances pretend to have seen what they never saw; assert facts that they had no knowledge of; go about lying to teach virtue; and, though not only convinced of Christ being an imposter, but having seen the

success of this imposter in his crucifixion, yet persist in carrying on; and so persist, as to bring upon themselves for nothing, and with full knowledge of the consequence, enmity and hatred, danger and death.

You know, people will die for what they believe to be the truth. We have fanatics today who are suicide bombers and who will blow themselves up for what they believe to be the truth. But no one dies for what they know to be a lie.

And you can search the historical record, but even when the eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection were tortured, their families were murdered, some of them were crucified upside down like Peter, some of them were beheaded like the apostle Paul, they were fed to lions, they were burned alive – there is not one single report of any of these eyewitnesses cracking under the pressure and saying, “No, don't kill me; don't kill my family; we made it up; its all a lie. We stole the body. We didn't see anything.” They followed their Master Jesus to the death because they knew what they saw was true. Jesus is risen from the dead!

And here is the last fact that I want to present for your consideration today.

The unanticipated fact of this faith arising among Jews

Matthew 28:9, 17

9 Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him... 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

It says here in Matthew 28:9 that the women took hold of his feet. This was a Near Eastern custom of bowing low before a King. What they are saying is Jesus has now become my King, my Savior, my Lord through his resurrection.

So you say, “What does this prove that these women and these men worship Jesus as Lord?”

We need to remember that these were Jewish women and Jewish men. I was talking this week on the phone with the Columbus School Superintendent, Dr. Gene Harris. We were talking for a while and she kept calling me “Pastor.” I've said, “Gene, we've talked so many times, please call me Rich.” She said, “Pastor, I just can't do that. It's not the way I was raised.”

So when you read that Jewish men and Jewish women fell at the feet of Jesus and worshipped him, the first thought that ought to occur to you is “that's not the way these men and women were raised.”

These days people pick their religion the way they pick restaurants. “I liked this restaurant for a little while, but the food is not so good anymore, so I'm going to try a different restaurant.” That's the way people in the 21st century pick their religion. “It

worked for a while, but it no longer works. I'll mix up a little Christianity with some New Age spirituality." But that's not the way 1st century Jews related.

How many of you have ever seen the movie Fiddler on the Roof? You know that great song in Fiddler on the Roof, - Tradition, tradition... No one in the history of the world held more fiercely to their traditions than 1st century Jews. You want proof for the resurrection? Think about this – how in the world did this faith ever arise among Jewish people, if it wasn't true?

Jews had 2000 years of Jewish tradition telling them that Jews never bowed down and worshipped any human being as God. It is idolatry. It is blasphemy.

Many of you know that I was raised in a Jewish family. What you may not know is that I went to a Jewish parochial school when I was a child. And I remember my teachers telling us over and over again that the difference between us Jews and Christians was that Christians bowed down and worshipped human beings, where as we Jews only bowed before God.

What in the world would ever cause a Jewish man or woman to bow down before a man named Jesus and worship him? What could account for the throwing off of 2000 years of tradition, if it wasn't this extraordinary experience of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead? What accounted very early on, historians say within a few years of Jesus' death, for Jewish people changing their day of worship from Saturday to Sunday? For a millennium and a half Jews worshipped God on Saturday, the 7th day of the week, because it was the Day of Rest, the day that God ceased creating the universe. And then suddenly, shortly after the death of Jesus, Jewish people living in Israel began to worship God on Sunday. What happened on Sunday to make Jews change their day of worship? If it wasn't seeing the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, then what was it? It had to be something amazing, life shattering, to change tradition.

Here's the final thing. History tells us that there were many, many Messianic Jewish movements in the century around the life of Jesus – both before Jesus and after Jesus. There were many folks who were hailed by a group of Jews as the Messiah. Now, the Romans killed off all of these would-be Messiahs because they were threats to Roman rule. They were killed off like Jesus. In no other Jewish Messianic movement do we find any other group of Jews saying, "Our Messiah rose from the dead." Why only in this movement of followers of Jesus, do we have this unique claim? Yes, you Romans killed our Messiah. But guess what? He rose from the dead! Why here and no where else?

For this one reason: Because it is true! Because it happened! Because Jesus is risen from the dead!

It says in verses 16-17 these words:

Matthew 28:16-17

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

Re response to the facts: faith or doubt

It has always struck me as strange that some worshipped and some doubted. Presented with the fact of the risen Christ, some doubted. What does that mean? What does that mean for you and me?

I don't think these folks had intellectual doubts. And, friends, I believe that if you look at and examine all the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, it is more than sufficient for a reasonable mind to conclude that Jesus is, indeed, risen from the dead. What does it mean that some doubted?

You know, sometimes people struggle to believe because it seems too good to be true. God invaded human history and gave us such a clear sign of himself – not something vague or a ghostlike appearance that we struggle to lay hold of; not a philosophy, something as concrete as a dead man rising and the promise that those of us who place their faith in this person will likewise rise from the dead and live eternally with him. Some people doubt because it is too good to be true. But it is true. This is the good news.

And you know, friends, some people doubt not because this is too good to be true, but sadly they don't want it to be true. Because if Jesus is risen from the dead, if he is unique in all of world history, if he stands in a category of one, this one man is indeed the Savior of the world, the Lord of all creation, then that means that we are going to have to do something with this man. Sometimes people doubt because they don't want to make the changes they think they are going to have to make in their morals, in their lifestyles. Sometimes doubt is really just another way of saying, "I don't want this to be true because if it is true I am going to have to change."

But it is true. And the change that Jesus invites you and me into is a change that will result in our ultimate fulfillment, our ultimate satisfaction in life, and our ultimate experience of eternal life.

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Rich Nathan
March 22-23, 2008
Easter Weekend
Matthew 28:1-17

I. The Rejection of History

- A. Ignorance of history
- B. The value of history
- C. Cheap substitutes for history

II. The Resurrection of Jesus: A Fact of History

- A. The unusual fact of women as chief witnesses
(Matthew 28:1-10)
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(Matthew 28:5,6)
- C. The utterly unlikely fact of the disciples stealing the body
(Matthew 27:57-66; 28:11-15)
- D. The unanticipated fact of this faith arising among Jews
(Matthew 28:9, 16, 17)

III. The Response to the Facts: Faith or Doubt (Matthew 28:17)