

"IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE"

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Did you see this morning's paper - the Final edition:  
They have discovered the body of Jesus.

Archeologists, Historians, Cryptographers, and Theologians have just released their findings after months of high-tech tests on the human remains and the deciphering of recently discovered ancient texts.

2000 years of suspicion has now finally been confirmed.  
The disciples of Jesus did in fact steal the body after his execution - just as the guards said.

It is Easter Sunday morning - What do we do?  
Cancel the service?

Now obviously no such story appeared in this morning's paper.

BUT what if it had?

In fact what if it appeared not only this morning but if for the past several months scientists and theologians of every religious persuasion had been allowed to see the remains of the body and see the results of the tests on it - and all agreed conclusively - it was the body of Jesus?

What difference would it make to you?

The Washington Post on Good Friday asked a prominent theologian, "What if Christ hadn't risen from the dead?"

The theologian replied: "If the bones of Jesus were found tomorrow, it would make no great difference to me. I would go on going to church as would the majority of Christians." (World 3/30/96 p26)

How about us? Would anything change?

What difference does it make if Jesus did or did not actually rise from the grave?

A couple of years ago Dave Shiflett of the Rocky Mountain News editorialized on why so many people only show up at church for Easter and Christmas.

He wrote that he understands church has a lot of competition these days with Sunday brunches, league sports, and golf BUT he suspects the major reason so many people attend church so irregularly is because the preachers don't believe what they are preaching.

I quote from Shiflett: "They preach a message so watered down that it doesn't even qualify as warm spit. The Sunday morning wine steward reads his text with more enthusiasm" than those preachers.

These are the preachers, like the theologian I've already quoted who don't believe the Easter event.

They either openly reject the Resurrection or they betray their disbelief by hedging on the issue.

The result, Shiflett wrote, "is that instead of offering the bread of life, they slop out a bowl of mush."

If their conclusion is that the resurrection didn't happen - why don't they find other work - either buy it or chuck it!

But what if the resurrection is NOT true?

Would you, too, just keep on going to church?

What difference would it make if the resurrection hadn't happened?

Here's what the Apostle Paul said in response to that question:

"If Christ has not been raised from the dead, what we have been teaching you is useless and what you have been believing is a pointless waste."

Or as Rocky Mountain News Dave Shiflett described it rather crudely but pointedly: "Your faith doesn't even qualify as warm spit"

As some of you know Steve Loomis and I were recently in India. In one temple we saw a father teaching his son how to bow down to the idol, how to make his sacrifice to a stone god.

Steve said nothing else on the trip touched him more profoundly than that scene - "Oh, the futility of such a religion"

Believing a lie.

\* Similarly Bob Knapp, of our church, spoke of recently seeing Jews at the Western Wall (the wailing wall) in Jerusalem.

There they stood bobbing back and forth, chanting their prayers, clinging desperately to a stack of rocks - hoping that somehow it would make them acceptable to God - Oh, the futility of such a religion.

We look on such people with a certain amount of pity - what fools.

And we don't say that angrily but sadly.

None of us wants to believe something that just isn't true.

Why waste our energy, our time and our money on what means nothing and does nothing.

And folks, if Jesus is dead - we are fools! Because what we believe is a lie and it won't do for us what we were counting on it to do.

Let me, like the Apostle Paul, mention two things every human being counts on their religion to do for them.

In I Cor 15:17 Paul writes that if Christ is still dead then we are still in our sins.

Sin really only bothers people if they think they might be held accountable for it.

And the issue of sin raises the issue of God.

Or maybe more accurately - the issue of God raises the issue of Sin.

If there is a God - and incidentally most people in this world have no doubt that a God exists -

And the few who deny his existence spend so much time and energy doing so that their shrill protests become an evidence for the existence of God.

But since there is a God every human being sooner or later is concerned about their relationship to him.

And that is where sin comes in - we instinctively know that sin damages or somehow conflicts with our relationship with God.

Some people try to refashion God, thinking that if they can shape him to their specifications then he won't let their sin interfere.

So they make a God of mush -one with no principles, no values, no backbone, and no mind.

But the Bible says God is holy and has a standard of holiness for us.

God does have values, standards, principles and we are created to live by them.

Some people don't try to re-make God into the image of their choice but instead they do try to appease him, thinking that if they give enough they can "buy" God off.

But the Bible says God is just - he can't be bribed or talked out of what is right - and the wages of sin is death.

The only way for sin to be properly dealt with is for it to be paid for.

The message of Good Friday is that Jesus paid for our sin by dying for us.

He satisfied Divine justice

BUT the proof that God accepted the sacrifice of His Son as sufficient payment for our sins is that He raised him from the dead.

If Jesus is still dead - then our sins are not paid for and we are still "in" our sins - we are still to be held accountable for them.

If Christ is dead then we are still in trouble with God.

If Christ is dead then our religion is futile - it has done nothing for us in terms of our relationship with a holy and just God.

II. The second thing every human being wants from their religion is some kind of victory over death.

Some religions invent reincarnation to attempt to satisfy this universal desire for life to somehow continue.

Some religions invent a cosmic oneness that will somehow accommodate life after death.

Some try to deny any existence after death - but that prospect is the most frightening one of all.

Others will try desperately to hang on to this life -

Fountains of youth, wonder drugs, anything to stay alive.

Embalming, sealed caskets, freezing the body - anything to hope that a cure may one day be found and a reversal of death may happen.

I well remember standing one noon in a room at Porter Hospital.

Nearby was the body of a man from our church who had died that morning while working at Martin Marietta.

If you have ever been with a person when they died, you know the difference between a live person and a dead one.

There is no similarity.

You can't be a little dead.

Nearly three hours later, the man's mother, sisters and brother, from another city came into the room and immediately began demanding that the man come back to life. They shouted, they cried, they urged.

Do you think that body came back to life?

They could have attached a respirator

They could have used electric shock

They could have hooked up every device known to medical science but that man was dead - it was irreversible!

We can't stand it - that death is the end.

But of all the thousands of millions that have lived since the beginning of time - how many who have died are alive on earth today?

Abraham, Hammurabi, David, Plato, Alexander, Napoleon, Churchill, Kennedy? Any of them? NONE!

And that is the end of the story if Christ is dead.

Just as always, death still wins.

Those you knew and cared about are gone (1 cor 15:18)

That's what the Bible says, "If Christ has not been raised then all those who have died, even those who died trusting in Christ, are lost" - gone forever.

What we have always suspected is true - Death is irreversible!

And that is not only true for those we knew and loved who have died but it is true for us:

As Paul said it, we have no hope beyond this life.

And with no hope beyond this life - life becomes futile, useless.

A couple of years ago I quoted to you from a movie in which Billy Crystal plays a bored baby boomer advertising representative.

Invited to his young son's school room to tell about his job, Billy suddenly realizes how pointless his life is.

He lets loose with a monologue that bewilders the children but describes very well what life is like for so many:

Value this time in your life," he began, "because this is the time in your life when you still have choices. It goes by so fast.

When you are a teenager, you think you can do anything and you do.

Your twenties are a blur.

In your thirties you raise your family, you make a little money, and you think to yourself, what happened to your twenties.

In your forties you grow a little pot belly, you grow another chin. The music starts to get too loud, one of your old girlfriends from highschool becomes a grandmother.

In your fifties you have minor surgery - you call it a procedure but it is surgery.

In your sixties you have major surgery, the music is still too loud but it doesn't matter because you can't hear it anyway.

In your seventies you and your wife retire to Ft. Lauderdale. You start eating dinner at 2:00 in the afternoon, you have lunch around 10:00 and breakfast the night before. You spend most of your time wandering around malls looking for the ultimate soft yogurt and muttering, "I wonder why the kids don't call."

In your eighties, you'll have a major stroke and you end babbling with some Jamaican nurse who your wife can't stand and who you call "mama"

Any questions kids?"

Funny- but Oh, the sad futility, the depressing uselessness of life without hope - the futility of a life without a future beyond the grave.

What if Jesus had not been raised from the grave?

Our faith is useless,

We are still alienated from God - still in our sins,  
Death still wins,  
and our lives are pointless.

**BUT CHRIST HAS BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD!**

There were eyewitnesses - over 500 of them.  
These eyewitnesses were credible witnesses.  
Those eyewitnesses put their lives on the line for what they saw -  
Christianity with a dead Christ and a church gathered around a grave  
is more unbelievable than the miracle of the resurrection.

The existence of the early church is evidence for the truth of the  
resurrection.

Jesus' body is gone.

If the rulers of Jesus' day had wanted to stop the silly rumors of  
a resurrection - all they had to do was produce the body - THAT  
they couldn't do.

Jesus has been raised and therefore our faith is not futile,  
our sins have been forgiven and death is not the end.

Three days before her death I was called to the bedside of a woman of our  
church.

When I arrived, she told me that during the night she had felt herself  
sinking rapidly and she knew she had only hours to live.

She had called me to say goodbye.

As we talked it became apparent that she was very clear mentally.

And while she spoke of death - her comments were not morbid.

This woman spoke of her complete confidence in the power of the  
risen Jesus to resurrect her body when He comes again.

She knew beyond any doubt that she would spend eternity in the

presence of the Lord.

I asked her if she was afraid.

She said she had no fear at all because she knew Jesus.

Where does such confidence come from?

That confidence is the result of the resurrection of Jesus.

It is that confidence I heard in the voices of Don Blakley, Rowena Ernst, James Collins, and that I hear in the voices of those who even now are facing life-threatening illnesses.

What difference does it make if Jesus rose from the dead?

Let those, in our church, who now face death or those whose loved ones face death, or have already died, tell you - It makes all the difference in the world and the world to come.

But the resurrection of Jesus not only makes a difference at the time of death - it makes a difference in life - now

A couple of years ago I was with a man who told me that his mother was a prostitute and that by the time he ran away at 10 years of age, he had had 12 "daddys".

Caught and placed in a foster home on a Montana ranch - God powerfully changed him through the godly, steady, and loving testimony of that rancher.

As I sat talking to that man now many years later - I could not help but think of the transformation of a life.

No comparison between the boy of 9 and the man of 40.

No explanation apart from the power of the resurrected Christ working in a boy's and man's life.

Yes, Christ has been raised from the dead.

And our faith is not useless,  
we are not still in our sins,  
our loved ones in Christ are not lost but are alive and will be resurrected.  
and our lives are not futile - they have purpose and they we are moving  
toward a goal - the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.