

Sermon 2-17-19
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Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY
Based on the Second Lesson for The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany,
1Corinthians 15:12-20

Did Jesus Faint?

As we said several weeks ago, Paul's two letters to Corinth deal quite extensively with the daily life of Christ's Church. There were many difficulties in Corinth created by a church full of former pagans who had converted to Christianity. Paul's letters correct both the incorrect doctrines and ungodly practices of the church at Corinth.

From this morning's second lesson, 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, it seems that some kind of doctrinal problem arose in Corinth concerning one of the most fundamental doctrines of Christianity – namely the resurrection of all the dead into immortal bodies on the great Day of Christ's return. On that Day all humanity will be resurrected, but not all humanity will enter the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom belongs only to those who have believed upon Jesus the Messiah as their righteousness before God, and to no others.

To combat this false doctrine in Corinth Paul used logic. He argued that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Jesus could have been resurrected. Paul pointed out that the people who were denying the resurrection of the dead were denying the very possibility of resurrection itself. And if the possibility of resurrection does not exist, then Jesus could not have been raised from the dead.

The great English philosopher, David Hume, whose work has found wide adoption in our time arrived at a similar philosophical position concerning miracles. Hume denied their existence. However, upon close inspection the arguments Hume uses are circular. Miracles can't happen because miracles can't happen. Paul is criticizing the resurrection deniers for a similar thing. They were saying that resurrection can't happen because resurrection can't happen.

Paul also noted that if their false argument were true, it had an unexpected and stunning consequence. Jesus Himself could not have been resurrected from the dead if resurrection is impossible. And if Jesus was not resurrected, then the whole Christian message absolutely falls apart. Without an historic resurrection of Jesus in real time Christianity is not only a waste of time, it is a false, pernicious thing that gives people a wicked false hope.

Now, the critics of Christianity have long recognized this fact. That's why Islam denies Christ's resurrection as it also denies His crucifixion. It's why Dan Brown wrote the DaVinci Code – a work of pure fiction. But as anyone knows, in our time fiction is easily received as fact. Therefore, folks believed the DaVinci Code, that Jesus of Nazareth was never crucified or resurrected. He ran off to France with Mary Magdalene and they had a love child who became a founder of one of Europe's royal houses – or some such thing. Oh. And all this is a secret kept in the vaults of the

Vatican. This despite the fact that the existence of Jesus of Nazareth, His crucifixion and resurrection are some of the best attested facts available from antiquity.

And there are many other theories that attempt to deny the miraculous resurrection of Jesus Christ. At the dawn of the 1800's Karl Bahrdt, Karl Venturini and others tried to explain away the resurrection by suggesting that Jesus merely fainted from exhaustion on the cross. Or, when they gave him the vinegar on a sponge, in it was a drug that made him appear to die. Later, he revived in the cool, damp air of the tomb, rolled away the stone from the inside and showed Himself alive. This is what is known as the swoon theory – swoon is an old-fashioned word for fainting. And, it explains the resurrection in naturalistic fashion not the supernatural way of Scripture.

This theory keeps on appearing in popular literature. In 1929 D.H. Lawrence wove this theme into a short story. He suggested that Jesus had fled to Egypt, where he fell in love with the priestess, Isis. In 1965, a book called *The Passover Plot* alleged that it was only the unanticipated stabbing of Jesus by the Roman soldier that foiled his complicated scheme to escape the cross alive. I remember reading that book as a teen because it was in our house. The swoon theory appeared again in a 1972 book called *The Jesus Scroll*. In 1982 *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* added the twist that Pontius Pilate was bribed to allow Jesus to be taken down from the cross before He was dead. In 1992 it was suggested in a book called *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Finally, it was cleverly repackaged in the Da Vinci Code.

A major problem with this theory is that there is no way to prove it. There is no evidence from ancient times. It's all modern Naturalistic speculation.

Now there is evidence from ancient times of someone surviving the cross, but here are the details. Flavius Josephus was a Jewish historian born in 37A.D. who died about 100A.D. He was a Jewish general in the first Jewish – Roman War, which lasted from 66 to 73A.D. He was defeated and captured early on in the war. He earned the respect of his captors the Roman generals Vespasian and his son, Titus, who allowed him to live. Josephus, as he is called, took the side of the Romans and was looked upon as a traitor by his own people. After the war, Josephus moved to Rome and had continuing favor, because Vespasian and later Titus became emperors. During his later years Josephus became an author. He wrote books concerning the Jewish War, the history of the Jews going all the way back to Adam, an autobiography, and a work where he defended his history against a critic.

In the centuries before the printing press, literate Christian Europeans read the works of Josephus more than any other book except the Bible. His book on the Jewish war is an eyewitness account of momentous turning points in Judaism, Christianity and Western civilization.

In his autobiography, Josephus wrote this: “[During the war] when I was sent by Titus Caesar with Cerealins, and a thousand horsemen, to a certain village called Thecoa, in order to know whether it were a place fit for a camp, as I came back, I saw many captives crucified, and remembered three of them as my former acquaintance. I was very sorry at this in my mind, and went with tears in my eyes to Titus, and told him of them; so he immediately commanded them to be taken down, and to have the greatest care taken of them, in order to their recovery; yet two of them died under the physician's hands, while the third recovered.”

OK, someone actually survived crucifixion, but how? He was taken down from the cross before he died and then nursed back to health. Notice, however, that of the three taken down from the cross only one survived. That's how deadly the cross was.

In an interview with Dr. Alexander Metherell, Christian apologist, Lee Strobel, established the following facts. 1. There is a real condition called hematidrosis. It's associated with a very high level of psychological stress, and sweat comes out of the sweat glands tinged with blood. 2. Roman historian Eusebius once described a Roman flogging saying, "The sufferer's veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure." Many people died before they could even be crucified. The rest went into what is known as hypovolemic shock from the loss of blood and pain. All historical testimonies are clear that Jesus survived the beating that day. 3. On the cross Jesus would have been nailed through the wrists and feet. His arms would have been stretched about six inches and his shoulders dislocated. Stretched out on a cross, the only way for a victim to breathe and not suffocate was to lift up and down on one's legs driving the foot nails deeper into the tissue. This is why they broke the leg bones of the men on either side of Jesus. Consequently, they soon would have died of suffocation, not to mention the pain. 4. All of this plus the hypovolemia would have caused Jesus' to go into heart failure at the end. He could feel it coming on. That's why He could say, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit." 5. The soldier's spear brought forth blood and water from Jesus' side. Heart failure would produce exactly this result in a victim. 6. The Romans were experts at killing people. And if somehow a prisoner escaped, the soldiers themselves would pay for it with their lives. 7. If Jesus had somehow revived in the tomb and gotten past the guards posted outside, the New Testament says that on Easter Sunday he walked a long distance with two disciples. How could He have done that on feet ruined by the cross? How could He have used his arms after they were pulled out of the sockets? 8. Finally, here is an important argument advanced by German Theologian David Strauss in 1835. A person in the kind of horrible and pathetic condition Jesus would have been in after His ordeal could not have been hailed as a conqueror over the grave. Instead, His followers would have felt sorry for Him and would have had to nurse Him back to health – hardly the material of a victorious resurrection narrative. The swoon theory is pure bunk. It has no basis in history whatever.

There is a place in Kashmir, India that claims to be the tomb of Jesus Christ. There's also another place in Japan. The place in India claims that Jesus survived the crucifixion and made his way to there where he lived the rest of his life. There is at least one website associated with this place. Claims are made on it that Jesus could have survived with the favor of the Roman centurion who declared Him to be the Son of God. This theory holds that the Roman centurion could have ordered Jesus taken down from the cross before He was dead.

This theory is unlikely for several reasons. First, there are non-Christian Roman authors who mention Jesus in their works. They all agree with the authors of the gospels that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact put to death by crucifixion under the authority of governor Pontius Pilate – put to death, not left half-dead. Second, the eyewitness testimonies say the centurion declared Jesus to be innocent and the Son

of God only after the moment of death. Where is the eyewitness testimony that says the centurion was sympathetic to Jesus before His death? It doesn't exist. Third, once the story spread that Jesus of Nazareth was alive, the Roman centurion would have been called to account for a botched or sabotaged crucifixion. There is no mention of such a thing among the non-Christian Roman authors. And, these writers would have had a vested interest in telling it, if it had happened. They were opposed to Christianity. Fourth, a Jesus recovering from scourging and crucifixion would have been unable to walk the distance from Jerusalem to Emmaus on that first Easter Sunday as Scripture says He did. And, his followers would have seen him as an object of pity rather than the Lord of glory. Fifth, if Jesus recovered and went to India, why didn't all His disciples go with Him? Why, instead, were they left behind to spread an absurd tale about His being resurrected, for which they all suffered dearly? More than that, why didn't Jesus stop them from spreading such a tale?

This is just a sampling of the attacks against the validity of Jesus' supernatural resurrection from the dead in an immortal body. All of them can be debunked.

The apostles and the other disciples are themselves a source of indirect testimony to the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. How so? Any time anyone reads the New Testament in effect they sit on a jury rendering a verdict about Jesus. Is Jesus the Christ? In order to answer that we're all forced to ask, "Are these witnesses to Christ, in particular the twelve Apostles, telling the truth?" Now, in a courtroom one of the ways to tell if a witness is telling the truth is through cross-examination of their motives. We can do the same thing with the Apostles.

The Apostles each claimed to have seen and touched the resurrected physical body of Jesus Christ. Each claimed it was a glorious body, even with the identifiable marks of crucifixion on it. It was not a body worthy of pity, but a body worthy of marvel and wonder. Therefore, what possible motive could any of these eyewitnesses have had in spreading the news that Jesus was physically raised from the dead?

Was money a motive? None of them ever got rich from preaching the gospel although that can happen today. So, money is out. Fame could have been a motive. But what was the price of their fame? Paul, for instance, got chased out of every place he went. People from what is present day Turkey even recognized him in far-away Jerusalem. They caused a riot leading to his arrest. Every Apostle except John was eventually put to death because they were all recognized as leaders of the new religion that was turning the world upside down. Visibility was important but it came with a stiff price – martyrdom. So, fame? Nah! Certainly political power wasn't a motive for the Apostles. Christianity didn't become politically and socially powerful until it was made the religion of the Roman Empire in 312 A.D. Before then, it was the religion of the powerless. So, persecution and martyrdom rule out easy money, fame or power. Obviously something greater motivated the Apostles and witnesses, namely the truth.

But, someone will complain that the followers of other religions are willing to die for their religion. They're willing to die for what they believe to be true. Look at the Muslims, for instance.

There is a difference, however. None of Mohammed's followers were direct eyewitnesses of the events Mohammed claimed made him a prophet. These events

happened alone in a cave. On the other hand, Jesus' baptism, ministry, miracles, suffering and death were all publicly witnessed. His resurrection was not open to the general public, but Jesus did display Himself publicly to a select group. So, Mohammed's followers were willing to die for what they believed to be the truth only because Mohammed told them so. Mohammed also promised them riches, slaves and women from conquest, and the same in heaven if they died in battle. On the other hand, the Apostles died for the public things they had seen and heard. They were promised no earthly gains, only invisible ones in the age to come.

It's clear that the Apostles and other disciples didn't just believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. They had seen it and were willing to risk their lives to share their testimony. It's clear that the Truth of the resurrection was their motive. The joy of having seen the unexpected and impossible drove them on. This is the only reasonable answer to the question of motivation. Down through history famous trial lawyers, experts in eyewitness testimony, have also come to the conclusion that the witnesses to Jesus' resurrection were not lying. They had no motive to lie. Jesus is risen indeed. He's not buried in India or anywhere else.

So, the Apostles were not false witnesses. And our faith in the historic events of Jesus death and resurrection is not futile or in vain. As a result we are no longer in our rebellion and sins. In Christ, we are saved from the ruin of our rebellion and sin. We have a hope in this life that makes all the difference. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.