

THE GOSPEL OF AN EMPTY GRAVE

"He is not here: for he is risen, as he said, Come, see the place where the Lord lay."
Matthew 28:6.

There is nothing novel about a grave. Early in man's history he dug a grave and he has been digging them ever since. All of us have stood by the side of a grave. Every one of us is journeying towards a grave. Even Christ, when He came to be man, to live among men, to love them and to die for them, had to go along the trail which ended in the grave.

At three o'clock on Friday afternoon, amid the gathering gloom, Jesus Christ cried, "It is finished," and gave up the ghost. In due time His body was taken down from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and they laid Him -- the marvelous speaker of the parables, the wonderful worker of the miracles and the Lord of the matchless life -- in the garden tomb, which belonged to Joseph.

When the third day began to dawn a group of weeping women came to the sepulcher with spices in their hands to anoint His body. Their Master was dead and gone. They still loved Him, but as a memory only. These broken-hearted women never dreamed that He would come forth from the grave. But, you know, when faith and hope are dead, love remains alive. You can kill faith and hope, but you cannot kill love. Without a ray of hope in their lives, or a particle of faith in His resurrection in their hearts, they still loved the One Whom they believed to be behind the stone in the borrowed grave. Before it was light that morning, they moved along towards the sepulcher, saying, "Who will roll us away the stone?"

When they arrived at the grave, they found the seal broken and the stone rolled away and the grave empty. Early that Sunday morning the angel of the Lord had come down, the soldiers had fallen away, the seal of the tomb had been broken and the stone had been rolled away. Christ had arisen from the dead, laid aside His graveclothes and walked out of that tomb as the living Lord, triumphant over death and the grave.

Darkness reigned in the hearts of the disciples following the crucifixion of Christ. They had hoped that He would redeem Israel, but now all of their hopes had vanished. In that tomb where His body had been placed they also had left their dreams of Israel's deliverance and of their reigning with Christ upon His throne. They did not anticipate His resurrection.

When the sorrowing women arrived at the tomb they found the graveclothes lying in order, but the body of Christ was not there. Mary Magdalene, the woman who loved Him in her unique way, sat over against the grave weeping. A little while before she wept because His body was placed in the tomb, but now she was weeping because He was no longer there. To the women the angel said, "I know that ye seek Jesus, who was crucified." Why did the angel add that clause? Because he knew their humiliation and their sorrow, and was about to say something else to them. "The One Who wore the crown of thorns; the One Who fell beneath the weight of the cross; the One Who was driven through with spikes by Roman soldiers; the One Who was stripped of His robe and dressed in a tunic; the One Who was spat upon; the One Who was blindfolded; the One Who had gall and vinegar placed on His blessed lips; the One Who was denied and betrayed; the One through whose side the spear was thrust; the One from Whom God turned His face, that One is risen from the dead." The only explanation for the empty tomb was that of the angel who sat upon the stone that had been rolled away from the door of the now empty sepulcher, namely, "He is not here: for he is risen."

At Mary's announcement of the empty tomb, Peter and John ran to the sepulcher. When they entered and found the linen clothes, and the folded napkin lying in a place by itself, they believed that Christ had arisen. Thomas, however, refused to believe

the statement of the other disciples that Christ was alive. The fact that they declared Christ had appeared to them in an upper room did not change his unbelief. Arguments were of no avail to Thomas. He announced that he would not believe unless he could see the print of the nails in the Lord's hands and feet, and place his hand into His spear-thrust side. When the disciples met again eight days later behind fast-closed doors, Christ came and stood in their midst. Then He said to Thomas, "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing." Immediately Thomas cried, "My Lord and my God." During the days which followed Christ showed Himself alive by many infallible proofs.

The resurrection of Christ is in some respects the most important fact of Christian history. It is the one theme that can never be exhausted. To explain it is beyond human power. Like every other miracle, it baffles the human intellect. What is needed more than anything else today is that personal experience by which one enters into union with the crucified and risen Christ.

In the latter part of the first half of the eighteenth century two young men were students at one of the leading universities in England. At that time the atmosphere in the university and in England was hostile to Christianity. These young men, Gilbert West and George Lyttleton, were infected with the contemporary unbelief. They decided that they would give Christianity the finishing stroke. They met and planned their strategy. They agreed that the primary foundations of the Christian faith were the resurrection of Christ and the conversion of Paul. They thought that if these two things were shown to be the mere fables of the imaginations of men then Christianity would crumble into dust and disappear forever.

Gilbert West took the resurrection of Christ and George Lyttleton (later, Lord George Lyttleton, Chancellor of the Exchequer) selected the conversion of Paul. They planned to work on their theses during the summer vacation, come back in the fall, compare notes and then completely disprove Christianity. Absolutely confident of success, they departed with great hopes of crowning achievements.

Intelligent men that they were, they did not start with secondary works but went to the sources. They went to the study of the Bible full of unbelief and prejudice, firmly believing that what they considered to be its fables would be easy to detect, easier to publicize and still easier to destroy. Their meeting by appointment in the fall was momentous. After examining the evidence carefully and weighing all the possibilities, they became convinced that the Bible was the inspired Word of God. Lyttleton said, "West, what have you to say?" He replied, "Oh, Lyttleton, I have something wonderful to tell you. When I came to explode the doctrine that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead on the third day, I had to be candid, I had to be sincere, I had to be honest, I had to search for my evidence. You may laugh at me, Lyttleton, but when I looked into it honestly, my mind and my deepest soul were convinced that Jesus did rise from the dead, and I prayed to Him, and He saved me, and I am His friend." Lyttleton said, "Thank God, West! I have something just as wonderful to tell you. When I came to explain that man Paul, and get rid of him, I, too, had to be thorough and candid. I had to search. I had to be true. You will rejoice with me, West, when I tell you that after I had searched and studied about Paul, by and by I found myself down on my knees, just as Paul got down on his knees on that Damascus road, and my cry was his: 'Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?' And I am a Christian, also, West."

Thus these two outstanding skeptics became two of the world's most noted Christians and wrote two of the noblest apologies of the Christian religion that have ever been penned. These two books, which were published in 1747, were: "Observations on the Resurrection of Christ" by Gilbert West, and "Observations on the Conversion of Paul" by George Lyttleton. Regardless of what any man's presuppositions or prejudices may be, if he is willing to study honestly the evidence of the Bible, he will discover that it is true. The Lord Jesus Christ did rise from the dead.

The resurrection of Christ has better attestation than any other single fact in history. It is significant because it authenticates everything that He said and did while He was here on earth. It confirms all of the prophecies which were made about Him, as well as all of the claims which He made for Himself. It proclaims that He is the divine Son of God. As Romans 1:3-4 says, "Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made the seed of David according to the flesh; And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead." It proclaims that He is indeed our Saviour, through whose shed blood our sins are forgiven. Christ's resurrection proclaims that He is the living Christ, whose mighty power is available to us in every circumstance of life. We worship a living rather than a dead Christ. He said, "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore" (Revelation 1:18). His resurrection is the divine confirmation of the Christian's hope of life after death.

It is difficult to understand why anybody would want to attempt to disprove the resurrection of Christ. Does anybody actually wish that death might be the end for him, and for his loved ones? No normal person wants to die in the first place, but since he cannot escape death he certainly does not want to remain dead forever.

If Christ had not arisen, then He would be dead now, and we would be worshipping a corpse today. If Christ had not arisen, all preaching would have been useless. God's Word says, "But if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain" (I Corinthians 15:14). If Christ is still in the tomb, then all preaching is vain, empty, deceitful, void of reality and worthless. If Christ did not arise, men have nothing to preach which has any reality to it. Moreover, if Christ had not arisen, faith in Him would be worthless. The Scriptures say, "But if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, and also your faith is vain" (I Corinthians 15:14). If He did not rise, then your faith, which has meant and still means so much to you, rests on what never happened; therefore, it would be worthless.

If the black assumption that Christ has not arisen were true, living believers would still be in bondage, sorrow and night. The Bible says, "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins" (I Corinthians 15:17). If Christ had not arisen, the righteous dead would have perished. The Word says, "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished" (I Corinthians 15:17-18). "If Christ be not risen," there hangs over every grave a darkness that no earthly light can ever remove. Just think, of all the graves of all the ages, not one to be emptied! What a bleak world a dead Christ opens to us! But, thank God, Christ arose! Thank God also for the fact that believers in Him will arise too. There is a sunburst of glory in the words, "But now is Christ risen from the dead" (I Corinthians 15:20). Thank God, the grave could not hold the Saviour! Christ is risen indeed.

"From the Cross they took Him, wrapped him in a shroud;
In a tomb they laid Him, followed by a crowd;
Guards were set to watch Him, and the stone made fast;
Yet, He rose in power, hope was born, at last.

"Raise your head, O pilgrim, upward turn your eye,
Your redemption hastens, glory draweth nigh;
Doors of hope are open, death has lost its gloom,
Christ the Lord is risen, He will lead you Home."

Not only is Christ risen and reigning, but one day He will return. May those of us who are Christians live in the light of His reign and return and do our part, by God's grace,

to bring into living relationship to Christ the multitudes for whom He died and rose again. The resurrection of Christ is a blessed guarantee of our own resurrection from the grave. Nothing is more certain than the fact that the dead will rise and live again. Our resurrected bodies will not be subject to disease, dissolution and decay, but will be like the body of Christ. What a glorious hope!