

REFLECTIONS ON BLESSED EASTER

Written by admin

Tuesday, 12 March 2013 09:10 - Last Updated Tuesday, 12 March 2013 09:48

by Dr. Henderson Ward



No event in the history of mankind increases with time and meaning to such an extent as does Easter. Looking back at the first Easter, its impossibility, its irreducible significance to all mankind, its timing at the nexus of outdated Judaism and fledgling Christianity and its assertion and imposition of Divine sovereignty one is aghast and the mind boggles at the sheer enormity of the occasion. This is an event that shook its foundation and changed the world forever.

"He is not here, but is risen" (Luke 24:6) Simple, unambiguous and mighty powerful.

These were the moving words spoken by the angel to the women who had entered the empty tomb and were perplexed that the body of Jesus was not there as expected. This occurred on the first day of the week, Sunday morning, and is the day we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and is called Easter. Many people are unfamiliar with the history surrounding Easter so I will take a few minutes to bring you up to date by giving you some historical information.

The word Easter is mentioned only once in the King James Version of the Bible (Acts 12:4) and this word in the Greek is "Passover" and so translated elsewhere in the KJV. The English word "Easter" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon name for the Teutonic (Germanic) goddess "Eastre"; the goddess of spring and fertility. Her festival was celebrated on the day of the spring equinox. To her was dedicated a month corresponding to our April.

Many of the traditions used in her worship survive to this day. The Easter Bunny, (a rabbit is a symbol of fertility), the Easter egg, painted with bright colors to represent the sunlight of spring (given as wish for productive and fertile year), and the giving of baskets filled with treats are just a few of the traditions that survive.

Easter is the time once a year when we celebrate this most important of festivals and to all Christians Easter is the foundation on which our faith rest. Without the resurrection our faith is groundless and our hope is in vain. Jesus was resurrected on that first Easter morning and

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because of that fact, Almighty God the Father endorsed all Jesus stood for and taught:

We know we can be saved by the grace of God.

We can go to heaven and be with Christ when we die.

We know the grave cannot hold us captive when we die.

We know because Christ lives we too shall live forever.

We know that Christ is alive and interceding with the Father for us.

We know all is well for our God is in control.

The resurrection of Jesus from the grave was a verifiable fact by a number of credible witnesses who saw the empty tomb and spoke with the risen Lord. For us today we have the powerful, inspired word of God in the form of the Bible and our faith in Almighty God. We can approach the telling of this marvelous event from a number of different perspectives and I want to look at it from the perspective of the visit to the empty tomb, the contribution of the angel, the appearance in person of Jesus Christ and the allegations made by the religious authorities.

First let us examine the attitudes of the witnesses

Any event anywhere in the world if witnessed by a number of people will be seen and reported differently by each individual. This is as it should be because our hearing is not the same, our eyesight is not the same and our understanding of what we are witnessing is not the same for everyone. We bring to bear our preferences, prejudices, education, cultural norms, politics, philosophy, perception and a whole lot more when we observe certain events. God does not afford humans the identical ability to recall or even to be aware of all the relevant details in any given situation and as a result we need to hear from all the witnesses to get as full an account as possible. This was exactly the situation at the resurrection of Jesus Christ that first Easter morning. Not all the disciples were witnesses of the empty tomb, and some believers are puzzled why they were not all there to witness this momentous event, but those who were there adopted different approaches.

Some merely observed

Skeptics may question the role and importance of women in the modern church but there is no denying the role they played in the early church. The earliest witnesses of the empty tomb were the faithful women who came with mixed feelings and agendas. The Bible puts it like this, "In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre." (Matthew 28:1)

Remember the purpose of their visit: they all came to see the sepulchre.

The next set of witnesses were the men, in particular Peter and John, who arrived at the empty tomb and they merely observed the situation, "Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw and believed." (John 20: 6 & 8). Take note that Peter and John were keen observers of the inside of the empty tomb.

Some came to work

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These faithful women who came to see the sepulchre also came to perform one last labor of love, one final act of devotion, one ultimate task of service, "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had brought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him." (Mark 16:1b) It was these same willing workers who were the messengers to the other disciples of the good news of the empty tomb. Yes women! Women in church are still outnumbering and outperforming the men in various ministries, even today!

Someone came and lingered

As happens in nearly all solemn occasions the crowd quickly departs at the conclusion while the curious one, in this case Mary Magdalene, lingers and gets a deeper experience. "Then the disciples went away again unto their own home. But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping" (John 20:10-11a) In her distress Jesus appeared to Mary, the first one to have contact with Jesus after his resurrection, and he gave her words of comfort. It pays at times to ignore the crowd and seek until you find what you are looking for.

Next let us examine the actions of the angel

God is not a God of reaction but plans well ahead and is proactive. Unknown to the disciples God had already acted decisively to enable them to be compelling witnesses of the empty tomb. The angel sent to carry out the task was busy.

The stone he rolled away

Entry to the tomb for these women was impossible, but God often provides solutions before the faithful can fully conceptualize the magnitude of the problem, "And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre." (Luke 24:2) Matthew stated it more dramatically, "And behold there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone, and sat on it." (Matthew 28: 2) Angels are still acting today in the welfare of God's children so even if you do not see them they are there, "The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them." (Psalm 34:7)

The soldiers he moved away

Handpicked veteran soldiers, chosen and armed particularly for the task of repelling those so minded to attempt the removal of Jesus' body, were rendered totally useless, "His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men." (Matthew 28: 3-4) Whatever obstacles you face, however huge, just remember that God is able to remove them and give you victory. Here is a remarkable, astonishing fact. The soldiers were there because the Jewish leadership remembered Jesus' teaching on his resurrection (that he will rise on the third day Matthew 27:63) and the disciples did not. Remarkable indeed!

The saints he made aware

Doubt is often the biggest hindrance in the life of believers and the angel calmly removed the

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doubt of these women and affirmed the reality of Jesus' resurrection. "And he said unto them, be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him." (Mark 16: 6) When doubt is removed, joy and gladness fill the void and we are motivated into meaningful action. (Remember the Samaritan woman at the well in John chapter 4. Her doubts were removed and she found salvation)

Next let us look at the arrival of the saviour

Jesus felt the concerns of all his disciples and decided he was going first to the tomb to assure the women in their acute distress that all was well.

We are touched by the Lord's timely appearance

As the women were on their way with the angelic message, Jesus came to meet them personally and gave them visible proof of his resurrection and comforted them. The Bible declared, "And as they went to tell the disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail." (Matthew 28:9a) Jesus lifted their spirits and turned a dreadful experience into one of delight; all hail means "Be joyful" "Rejoice".

We delight at their true adulation

These loyal, committed, true believers overcome with joy at seeing Jesus again broke forth into spontaneous adulation and worship, "And they came and held him by his feet, and worshipped him." (Matthew 28: 9b) Notice the posture of true worship: at his feet!

We are grateful for the Lord's total assurance

The angels knew of the resurrection and could so testify; the witnesses having been so informed by the angels could testify but nothing could compare with the personal assurance of Jesus himself. The Bible states, "Then said Jesus unto them, Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there they shall see me." (Matthew 28: 10) When Jesus speaks we are always assured for he is our strength and our salvation. Has Jesus spoken to your heart yet? Or are you still perplexed and troubled. Remember what Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me." (John 14:1)

Next let us consider the accusations of the enemy

Jesus had warned the Jews about not believing the truth and warned them that if they did God would send them a strong delusion to believe lies. The Jewish leadership aptly demonstrated the wisdom of Jesus' warning for they promptly orchestrated events to deceive the general population and to some extent they succeeded.

We see their basic problem

The Jewish leadership now had a monstrous problem on their hands because if Christ is risen from the dead then their religion, and in particular its spiritual leaders, who had so persecuted

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Jesus, would be confined to a footnote in history. The truth was put to them and the Bible puts it like this, "some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done." (Matthew 28: 11b) The Jewish leadership knew the facts having been thoroughly appraised but the truth is always the first casualty in any war. By concealing the truth they were damning their own souls.

We observe their brash plan

The resurrection of Jesus Christ has been a problem for many over the centuries and like many the Jewish leadership tried to find a way to explain away this mighty event with lies and distortion. The Bible declared, "And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept." (Matthew 28:12-13) One is reminded of the Gamaliel principle for God will prevail, "But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it" (Acts 5:39a) Thank God their wicked deception did not work for today millions know the truth and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We note their bold pretext

The Jewish leadership knew the severe penalties attached to soldiers sleeping on duty and perjury but in desperation agreed with the soldiers to commit these most serious criminal acts. It shows the depth of depravity to which people will go to deny that Jesus Christ is risen. These Jews were determined that the truth would not be known, "And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you." (Matthew 28:14)

Over the centuries many absurd theories have been put forward for the empty tomb, but they remain just that "absurd theories". Jesus is alive and many witnesses saw him and spoke to him and he even sat at meal and ate and drank with his disciples. Above all we have the supernatural confirmation, "He is not here, but is risen" says the angel in our text and that is mighty good enough me. I say thanks to God for the resurrection of Jesus our Savior and thanks to God for this blessed Easter.

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