

It All Begins in a Tomb

I Corinthians 15

Easter message by Dr R Bruce Montgomery
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The Young Explorer - (I'd like to start with a little story. If it sounds familiar, it's probably because you've heard me tell it before). I've told many times before

For many centuries the men and women in Europe looked out upon the western sea, what we call the Atlantic Ocean, and they saw the sun's rays reflecting upon the glittering surface and they wondered. They wondered if there was anything beyond.

The wise said there was nothing out there at all; that you would sail off the edge of the world if you went too far. In fact, Spain had inscribed on its coat of arms it's national motto: Ne Plus Ultra - "*there is nothing beyond.*"

One day a man named Christopher Columbus went west on the shining waters. He sailed off into the sunset as the people watched and wondered.

Finally, after a long time, the sails reappeared and the crowd was ecstatic. They shouted with joy, and Columbus announced that there was a land beyond the sea that was rich beyond their dreams. It was a glorious paradise. The king of Spain changed the motto of that land, and it still reads, "Plus Ultra," "*there is more beyond!*"

For many centuries people stood beside the dark hole that we call a grave and as they watched the remains of their loved ones being lowered into the ground they wondered, "*beyond the dark waters of death, is there anything more?*"

Then one day a young explorer rode a cross off the edge of the world and crashed into hell. They put him into the ground, and he descended into the very blackness of the pit.

His friends mourned his passing, but on Resurrection morning, as the sun arose in the East, the Son of God stepped forth from the grave and declared, "*There is something beyond! There is a paradise beyond your greatest expectations. And there awaits a heavenly Father, waiting with outstretched arms to wipe*

every tear from your cheek. Come, let me take you there, to the place I have prepared in heaven for you."

The Birth Tomb

We normally associate tombs and graveyards with death and the end of life. Is there any place more depressing, more sorrowful, more despairing, more forbidding than a graveyard?

The tomb is where hope ends, where dreams end, where life ends, where everything ends.

And yet, amazingly, we discover in the Bible that its where it all begins - its where redemption begins, its where faith begins, its where hope begins, its where the gospel begins.

Did you ever consider how radical and completely upside down that is? In God, at the tomb, the place of the end becomes the place of the beginning.

It's the radical way of the kingdom. We think the journey of life goes from life, (beginning at birth) to death. In God, the journey doesn't go from life to death, but from death to life. So to find life, you must begin at the place of death.

It is in the place of hopelessness that we find true hope, and in the place of sorrow that we find true joy, and in the place of death that we are find birth.

Tombs come in various shapes, styles. From huge pyramids of Egypt, to marble buildings in our nation's capital, to simple in ground tombs marked only with a tombstone, often referred to as a headstone (used to be upright, but now often just on the ground to make it easier to mow over them.

But we're not talking about just any old tomb, of course, but specifically and solely to the tomb of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Its precise location has long been debated. The traditional site is on the ground floor of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem - enclosed by a shrine first built in the time of Constantine (300s A.D.)

In the 1800's another site was suggested, now known as "Gordon's Calvary" which is located to the north of the Old City of Jerusalem. I've been there numerous times. So have many of you.

It is presumed that Jesus would have been buried in a garden in close proximity to Golgotha (John 19:41). Gordon's

tomb lies within a well-tended garden, and overlooking the valley near it is a rock formation that even today looks much like a skull.

Whether or not this is indeed the actual tomb of Jesus, it gives us a very good picture of what sort of tomb he would have been buried in. A flat piece of ground in front of a cave, the mouth of which could be covered by rolling a large disk-shaped stone in a groove cut into the rock below.

Stepping into the entrance would find yourself in a central pit tall enough to stand upright in, with stone niches or benches carved into the bedrock on the other three sides of the chamber.

Explanation of burial method: bodies wrapped in linen, left to decay. After period of time the bones would be cleaned and placed in a burial box (called an ossuary). You'll recall the stir of an archaeological discovery in 2002 in Jerusalem of a 1st century limestone ossuary with the inscription "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."

1st evidence of the resurrection is actually the EMPTY TOMB. It appears on the scene before Mary or Peter or John or anyone else saw Jesus.

The angels didn't roll away the stone to let Jesus out, but was a first part of demonstrating he was gone – so people could get in to see it was empty.

Even the enemies recognized the tomb was empty. No one doubted it was empty. Could go there and check it out. Question was how it came to be empty. What does it mean? But never a question about whether or not it was empty!

What If It Was Just a Lie?

Throughout history there have been those say the resurrection of Jesus is a lie. They claim such things as:

- Body was stolen
- Jesus just swooned
- Disciples hallucinated
- Was just a legend or myth

The first who said it was a lie were paid to tell a lie. 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 what had happened.* (What had happened was recorded in verse 2:

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and rolled back the stone and sat on it. Vs. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid they shook and became like dead men).

Vs. 12, 13 *When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" Then they promised to keep them out of trouble if word got back to Pilate.*

Weaknesses in the soldiers' alibi:

- How could they ID (identify) the disciples if they were asleep? (No security cameras in those days).
- If were awake, and saw and could identify the disciples, why didn't they either arrest them on the spot or issue a warrant for their arrest? Molesting graves was a serious offense.
- How could they sleep through the removal of the stone? Huge, noisy.

However, many believed the report that "it was a lie." One of the first to hear and believe their "explanation" was an upcoming young Pharisee, destined to be one of the rulers of Israel, named Saul. He was so convinced that it was a hoax that he became the chief antagonist and persecutor of the church.

Something caused him to change his mind. Had a personal encounter with the one he had been telling everyone was dead!

He changed his tune from "it's a lie!" to: "It's the truth." In fact, "it is of first importance."

For Paul, the resurrection was the epicenter of his belief, the decisive happening of history. He and the other disciples staked everything on their belief that the resurrection was an actual, literal, historical event.

Encounters with the resurrected Jesus were for the most part under the most ordinary of circumstances:

- A private dinner party – shows up, "I'm not a ghost. Touch me. Watch, I'll eat something."
- Two men walking down a road
- A woman sobbing in a garden
- Fishermen working a lake.

- 500 unnamed followers at once.

Science says if there is any such thing as infallible proof, it is the repetition of the same experiment.¹

Each one of these is the repetition of the same experiment. They all encountered the same phenomenon. All came to the same conclusion. What was it? Jesus is alive!

But what if it was just a lie?

Would it really make any difference if it was just a lie?

Paul poses that question in I Corinthians 15:14-19. Turn there with me please.

1. v. 14 Preaching is useless (kenon/kena = *empty*). Wasted my education – sure picked the wrong career!
2. v. 14 Your faith response is also “useless”. Empty or hollow
3. v. 15 Witnesses are liars - therefore can't believe anything they wrote (toss the Bible).
4. v. 17 - Faith ineffectual (NIV “futile” – *powerless, fruitless, aimless*. Doesn't accomplish a thing!
5. v. 17 Still in sins. No solution. Sins aren't forgiven. Live with the guilt! Live in fear – the sword of judgment hangs above your head.
6. v. 18 Buried believers are lost. [name a few – Jo Bickel, Jean Miller, Jim and Ruth English, Cheryl Whiting, Jim Hujing, Esther Parker).
7. v. 19b We are pitiful! Have been taken in – a laughing stock. If just a myth, just a fairy tale. We really are stupid!
8. v. 32b Doesn't matter how you live. If this life is all there is, may as well go with personal hedonism and political anarchy.

“But” – vs. 20 *it is true! Christ has indeed risen from the dead! He is the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep!”*

Since true:

Validates all Jesus taught! Everything he promised will come true!

1. Preaching is useful, not a waste of time.
2. Faith response to the preaching of the gospel is smart, not foolish. It makes a difference. Christ conquered death, therefore we can conquer our fears and anxieties. We

have been transformed from creatures of darkness to creatures of light!

3. Witnesses are reliable. What changed this sniffing band of unreliable followers into fearless evangelists? What accounts for this whiplash turn about of men from cowardice and instability to boldness? Surely the disciples would not die for the sake of a cobbled-up conspiracy theory? Were transformed from fear to courage because Jesus is alive!

What they reported and wrote down is true. Can trust the Bible. It does matter what you believe. There is objective truth.

4. Faith is effectual. At moment I receive by faith the gracious gift of God dying in my stead, I am equipped with resurrection power. Nothing can separate me from the love of God. As we sing: “*because he lives, I can face tomorrow!*”
5. I am not still in my sins! They are forgiven, they have been remitted, taken away! Resurrection of Jesus releases us from the grim specter of hell. You don't have to feel guilty or afraid ever again. You are no longer estranged from God, alone and alienated. God calls you “son.”
6. Buried believers are not lost! Because he lives, we too shall live. As vs. 20 , “*he is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*” Souls are gone to God, bodies will one walk again. Buried my grandparents and my mom, and Connie's dad and mom and brother, and many friends knowing they are going to rise!
7. Believers are to be envied, not pitied! Resurrection equips us not just to die, but to live! We have something the whole world is looking for! Gives meaning, purpose to life.
8. It does matter how we live. Vs. 58. “*Therefore, my dear brothers, [therefore = because the resurrection is not a lie] stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*”

I'm sure you've run into people that have lied to you. Who promised one thing, but delivered another.

But Jesus never fails to keep his word.

And he said, that if you believe, you will live forever with him! Here it is in his own words, from the last part of John 11:26. He says, *he who believes in me will live, even though he dies.*

There is only one way to get to heaven – and that is to believe in Jesus Christ. John 3:16 *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

My greatest desire for you is that you would come to Him, and invite Him into your life as Lord and Savior.

Becoming a Christian is not hard! It’s easy. As Paul told the jailer in Philippi who asked, *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”* the answer is *“believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved”* (Acts 16:30,31).

Deep within you, God has placed a hunger that is fed only by His Word.

Deep within you, God has placed a thirst that can only be quenched by the Living Water.

Deep within you he has placed a longing for true love and intimacy that is only realized when you embrace Jesus as the Lover of your soul.

Quit *“looking for love in all the wrong places”* and fall in love with Jesus! His desire for you is that you would find your joy and delight and happiness in Him right here and right now.

Experiencing this new life I’ve been talking about doesn’t have to wait until they lay this old body in the ground. It’s something you begin to experience the moment you are born again.

Jesus said, *“I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full* (Jn. 10:10). Everything God has created is good – including you; especially you.

The question is, *what will you do with what he has given you? Your talents, your personality, your looks, your wealth?*

You can exploit it. You can pollute it. You can twist and distort the good in a way which will destroy you as a person.

Or you can die to self and let God live through you! God designed you. He knows how you function best. So quit trying to run your own life, and let him into the driver’s seat!

“Oh, the places you’ll go and the people you’ll meet!” will be far beyond anything imagined by Dr. Seuss (who penned those words).

Application: Death to self

The Butterfly Song
(sung by the Boone Sisters)

In the land of caterpillars with its dandelion pillars,

For the worms there was no world beyond their town.
They didn’t know a bird could fly;
They’d never seen a sunlit sky.
Their eyes were always facing down;
Their lives were fastened to the ground.
In the land of caterpillars with its dandelion pillars.

But one young caterpillar saw
That they were blinded by their law.
He spent his lifetime showing them the sky.
He said he’d fly just like the birds
Some said ‘take me,’ some said ‘absurd.’
‘Yes, someday I will fly,’ he said.
‘But first I have to die.’
In the land of caterpillars with its dandelion pillars.

Then they led him to a fallen leaf, to see the caterpillar chief,
Who questioned him and sentenced him to die.
So he made him spin himself a tomb
But nature changed it to a womb
And he was born again to fly, and be the world’s first butterfly.
In the land of caterpillars with its dandelion pillars.

Butterfly, Butterfly,
Won’t you please teach us to fly?
You told us that you would someday;

But we thought it was a lie.

Then the wind breathed out a sigh,
And filled the air with his reply.
He whispered as he fluttered by:
“You only have to die.”

A man lived very long ago, a man of sorrow, man of woe,
He came to open up our earth bound lives.
What once was his cocoon is now, a dark and empty tomb.
The day he went to die for me, he showed me how to fly,
you see,
He showed me how to fly.

Butterfly, butterfly, won't you please teach us to fly
You told us that you would someday
But we thought it was a lie.

Then the wind breathed out a sigh
And filled the air with his reply.
He whispered as he fluttered by
“You only have to die.”
“You only have to die.”

Prayer: Thank you Lord for reminding us today of the
marvelous mystery of the gospel, that the tomb is not the end, but
the beginning.

May each us die to our selves, and live for you, and with
you, forever and ever. Amen.

ⁱ Citation: Walter Martin and Jill Martin Rische, *Through the Windows of Heaven* (Broadman & Holman, 1999).