



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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The Case for Christ, Part 6: “Was He There?”

Mark 16:1-8

World Day of Prayer for Burma; Healing Ministry

Congratulations for your success in making the shift to Daylight Savings Time, so you would join us for worship this morning. Way to go! I’m glad I’m not alone today!

For several weeks, now, we have been working our way through Lee Strobel’s book, *The Case for Christ*, with our Sunday kick-off messages, our daily readings, and our discussions in Life Groups, Sunday School classes and Bible Studies. I have always enjoyed Strobel’s hard-headed approach, because it speaks to people who don’t believe what they cannot see, touch, and measure. By putting the evidence out, as if this were a case for a trial of the truth about Jesus, Strobel shows Christian faith can stand up just fine to objections that come from that place.

Today, I want to do several things in the brief time we have together. First, I want to whet your appetite for this week’s reading from Strobel’s chapter 11 and especially his chapter 12. Second, I want to begin today (and continue next Sunday) to prepare you for your mission; I want to give you a big nudge toward inviting someone to come to one of our Resurrection Day services—either the 7 a.m. SonRise outdoor event and the breakfast that follows, or our full-blown Celebration here at 10 a.m. And lastly, I’m going to use the empty tomb as a metaphor for your heart.

Let’s begin with God’s Word, with a text we usually read on Easter (the day I call Resurrection Day). Please open your Bibles to Mark’s gospel, and find chapter 16, verses 1-8, right at the end. This is the earliest account of the empty tomb. This account has often served as a springboard for critics of the Christian faith. So listen—not only for evidence on the question, “Was the tomb empty back then?” but also for God’s Word TO YOU AND ME TODAY. *[text]*

Like so much of Mark’s gospel, the style of this account (if you lay it beside the other gospel records) is very spare and short. It focuses on action—not too many descriptive adjectives. And then—well, weren’t you expecting more than just that last verse, “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” (NIV)

A lot of believers have wondered about this, too. Perhaps your Bible has more after verse 8; some manuscripts of the time do continue for another several verses. But the oldest and best manuscripts stop at verse 8. And since most scholars think Mark was the earliest assembled gospel account, and therefore least likely to have picked up legendary additions, this sudden ending seems to suggest that no resurrection accounts were part of the first Christian experience. Mark ends his gospel with the word, “afraid”. Accounts of Jesus’ appearing to his disciples got tacked on later—*perhaps they were made up?*

Strobel deals with this and other objections as he interviews Dr. William Lane Craig concerning the empty tomb accounts in all the gospels. I'll just make a critical point here, that resolves this issue with Mark's sudden ending.

Mark didn't need to include accounts of Jesus' appearing to his disciples after death because his readers already knew about those, themselves; many of them had experienced their risen Lord, themselves. But they had not been around for his earlier ministry, and only a couple of women, the records show, had stuck with Jesus through the agony of his crucifixion. This account of the empty tomb discovered by the women was for Mark a starting place; it was the first link to what the earliest followers of Jesus would have experienced themselves. Mark's mission was to fill in the other links of this chain of God's plan of redemption, so his readers could understand the whole of Jesus' ministry for which his resurrection was the confirming exclamation point. Jesus' triumph over death was never in doubt for the first followers of Jesus. It was not just a belief; it was their shared experience. Maybe Mark was just being thrifty—parchment was expensive, and he was just saving paper. ☺

This is but one of the questions that get answered by Strobel in his investigation of *The Case for Christ* portion we will read this week. I hope this accomplishes my first promise to you this morning—to get you excited to read this week's portion of Strobel's book. But now, I want to nudge you strongly—and I'll do it again next week—to take on a mission; I want you to do just a wee thing, take a single step to do what Jesus told you to do, “make disciples”. Making disciples is “Mission One” of our Church, right? So here's another opportunity for you.

I want you to invite someone who is not following Jesus to attend Resurrection Day services here on the twenty-third. You could bring them with you either for the 7 a.m. service and breakfast, or for the 10 a.m. service. But make the invitation. Do it this week, follow up next week, and bring them on the 23rd. It's a specific thing you can do. How hard is it to invite? Isn't that just “being friendly”?

But I hope for more. I hope you have been building yourself into the life of this person—or at least starting to do that. And I hope our study together is giving you more confidence that your decision to follow Jesus each day has solid evidence behind it; it's not just your personal “thing”, it's the truth that changes ALL life, not just your personal hobby.

There are a couple of helps for you, to start a conversation toward an invitation. First: “Easter stuff” has been in the stores for weeks—the Easter baskets, chocolate eggs; yellow and lavender are all over the “seasonal” shelves. So that's one take-off point. You can say, “Have you seen all of the Easter stuff on the shelves of Longs and Rite-Aid?” (Yeah, they probably have.) So, start with that shared experience, and say, “The ‘big day’ that's behind all this is Easter Sunday, the twenty-third--and for Christians, it's even a bigger deal than Christmas. We're having a “coming out” party for Jesus on the 23rd. This would be a great time to see what all the fuss is about. If you're a morning person, you could check out the SonRise service at 7 a.m. They have a free breakfast at our church after the outdoor service. Or, you could come with me at 10 a.m. for the indoor service with the full choir and all.”

☺ See—you can do that! And the merchants have given you help to get started on the invitation conversation.

And we've given you another help for starting such a conversation—this very study! Taking your book with you, you could say, “I've been reading this book that I've really enjoyed,

about the evidence behind the Christian faith. It was written by an atheist newspaper reporter, approaching the events of Jesus' last days as if he was investigating a crime, and gathering evidence. It's a great read. I want to finish it by Easter, when our church is having a wrap-up on this study together. You might really enjoy this wrap-up, at least. I'll loan you my copy of the book so you can get an idea of what this is about--but I'll need the book back in a couple of days, because I haven't finished it myself. The wrap-up is either at 7 a.m. at sunrise (and they have a free breakfast afterward), or at 10 a.m. I'd like to take you to one of those events, and see what you think about it."

See—both the merchants and our church have given you ways to make a natural turn in a conversation, to make it easy for you to invite. But will you do it? Or, like the last word in Mark's gospel, are you "afraid"?

Well, "get over it". Listen, if we sit on this and let others go to hell without Jesus, we have been terribly unloving. And we will have to answer to God for that. This is your nudge. Get on it!

The last thing I said I'd do today is look with you at the Empty Tomb as a metaphor for your heart.

Did Jesus die for you, get buried in a tomb, and rise again to destroy death's final grip? Was the tomb truly empty, where Death sought to keep him?

What about your heart? Is it empty, or full? See, if your heart does not have the Living Lord Jesus alive in it and directing your life, then for you, Jesus is dead, dead, dead, and still in the grave. Your heart is his tomb with his dead body in it.

If you don't want to take this message of God's offer of Life and Continuing Redemption Project to others, then your Jesus is dead. And I'm sorry for you. Jesus himself told us, "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your Name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matt 7:21-3, NIV) We have to know Jesus by experience, and follow him as he works in our world, doing what he did, and more. Then he's the LIVING Lord alive in our hearts, and not still rotting in a tomb in Israel, or in the center of our chests.

So—dead or alive—who is Jesus, in your heart? And who are you for Jesus—a 'tourist', or a servant doing what you see the Master doing? If you're not a servant, if you're just a believer, then of course you won't follow through to build a relationship with someone who is not (yet) a follower of Jesus. But—here's the truth: there are consequences. It really matters what you do with Jesus.

After our final song and blessing, we'll begin our healing ministry. We invite you to stay and pray through this time, that God's power would show up in our work, and that the Enemy would have no power to interfere with what God wants to do through us. To join us in this prayer time through our healing ministry, please move to the center section. And, if you have a need for healing yourself, or you want ministry through you for another, by all means, move to the center section as others leave, so you're ready to come to a healing station when there's an opening.

Please understand—part of a healed, whole life is complete faith in our LIVING Lord. You may be satisfied with life as a “tourist”, but you’re not living as you could live, serving God with God’s power working in and through you. Lack of faith is lack of health—a sickness that saps strength and makes you settle for what you think is ‘normal life’. Maybe the time has come for you to want much more! You could come for ministry, too, today.

Today, I hope I’ve excited you to read the next sections of our study book, I hope I’ve given you a strong nudge to connect with a non-believer you know and invite them to worship on Easter, and I hope I’ve helped you look at your heart as a tomb—either it’s full of a dead Jesus that you can ignore, or it’s empty of a dead body, and filled with the life of the LIVING Lord.

Let’s sing our final song, hear God’s blessing, and begin our ministry of healing. Those who must leave, leave quietly, please, after the blessing.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on March 9, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]