



Auburn Presbyterian Church

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

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 apc@auburnpresbyterian.org

The Case for Christ, Part 8: “You Be the Judge”

Matthew 28:1-10

RESURRECTION DAY

Isn't it fascinating what some people think about Easter? That's quite a variety! Some think it's a waste of time. Some find it confusing. Some find it the focus of their faith.

These days, it's almost against the law to insist that there is absolute truth of any kind. You have 'your truth' and I have 'my truth'. But that's silly. We DO attach absolute value to truth; sometimes your view of truth has life and death consequences.

Here is the bridge across Sydney Harbor, Australia. It's a world-famous span, one of the most-photographed anywhere. On special nights, engineers attach fireworks to the bridge members, and the bridge becomes part of an awesome fireworks show around the harbor.

You can walk to the top of the harbor bridge; they give guided tours. The tour company loans you climbing gear and you clip yourself to a safety cable with the other few people of your group. Do you see that flag on the top of the span? That's how high you can go.

Now, that would be a good time to test your view on the truth of “gravity”, don't you think? You say you don't believe in gravity? Go ahead—just unclip yourself from the cable — but remember, that first step is a long one! See, we do accept some universal truths here and there.

I bring this up because our church has been studying Lee Strobel's book, *The Case for Christ*, over the last 8 weeks. Lee was a hard-bitten atheist crime reporter for *The Chicago Tribune* when he set out to apply the standards of courtroom evidence to the accounts of Jesus we find in the New Testament. Chapter by chapter, Strobel interviewed experts on the evidence, to see if the standard “case” Christians make for Jesus Christ has any truth in it or not.

First, he talked to Dr. Craig Blomberg, an expert in Biblical manuscripts and history. The Bible was written so long ago--can we trust its record is reliable, and has held firm in the centuries since Jesus walked the earth? And it turns, out—yes, indeed, we have far more evidence for the reliability of the Bible record about Jesus than about any other ancient document. Further, the New Testament gospel writers clearly had the intent to preserve the truth, the ability to do so, and the character that can be trusted. The facts we have (literally) unearthed through archaeology about places and people fit well with what the Bible records.

Well, were the gospel writers biased? Of course they were; they had a propelling love for their subject, and that comes through. But that does not show they distorted their record; besides, others around them at the time could have objected to errors or lies. Moreover, these followers of Jesus had nothing to gain but persecution and ridicule in those years when Israel suffered under the Roman Empire. The “gospelers” were not making money off their writing,

nor making themselves famous. Further, the records these writers gave us do not hide embarrassing facts or reflections on Jesus' followers, nor pretend the first Christians were saintly. They were pretty ordinary men and women, and the record shows that. And there's still more: non-Christian sources of the time validate many of the facts in the Bible accounts, because they cite those same facts for the purpose of criticizing those who followed Jesus.

All in all, it was an impressive beginning for Strobel's inquiry we read that first week. Strobel even spent a whole chapter (and some of his questions in each of the other chapters as well) bringing up rebuttal evidence from critics of the Christian faith. The experts Strobel interviewed dealt with those objections handily, using other evidence widely known among people who have studied ancient manuscripts and culture.

Having established the reliability of the records, Strobel then looked at the Jesus who is the center of these biographies. Was Jesus who he said he was, the Son of God and Messiah—did HE HIMSELF really believe it? And if so, was he perhaps insane to believe it? No, Jesus comes off as one of the sanest human beings in recorded history. Well, then, was he truly fulfilling the specifications of God's Son through his life and ministry? Did Jesus—and Jesus alone—match the identity of the Messiah God had promised through the Old Testament prophets? Simply said, Yes. (You can read all the particulars in Strobel's book, and he gives lots of notes on sources beyond what he cites in his pages.)

We've come to the end of what Christians call Holy Week, and today is Resurrection Day. So, this is the perfect day to examine, as some charge, that Jesus' death was a sham and his resurrection a hoax. Can we believe his body was really gone from the tomb where he was laid after the Romans put him to death on their cross?

So today, let's pick up a Bible text with one of these accounts of Jesus' empty tomb and two of his post-resurrection appearances. Here is Matthew, chapter 28, starting with verse one. Listen for God's voice FOR US, through the words I read today. *[Matthew 28:1-10]*

Many modern people balk at a story like this. Jesus died on Friday, before sundown. (Sundown was the start of a new day, in Jewish reckoning.). In the race to take down the body of their Master so as not to pollute the Sabbath with a shameful, naked, dead body hanging in public, his followers had not had time to bury his body properly. Now on this third day, these women were bringing the spices and oils their culture used to express grief, and (frankly) keep the stink down. A rich member of the Jewish Sanhedrin council had a family tomb among the other wealthy family graves, and he offered it to Jesus' followers for his body's final resting place. On this third day, the women were going to do it as they would have, if they could have, when they first took the body down.

You heard the account. Earthquake! Ground movement! An angel appears, as bright as day! Soldiers faint!

The women are terrified. But the angel has an assignment for them: go, tell Jesus' disciples he has been raised from the dead, and that they are to meet Jesus in Galilee. But that's not all—then Jesus himself meets them on their way back to where the disciples had been in hiding. After they get hold of themselves, they run to him and fall down before him in worship. Jesus repeats the message about meeting him up north in Galilee, where most of them had grown up.

And that's just what happened. Here is verses 16-20, the last words of Matthew's account of Jesus. Listen again for God's Word alive for us today. [text]

These disciples changed their lives radically (the book of Acts has those details). Their religious customs, their way of life, their purpose—all of these changed in ways that made no sense unless they had been encountered by God in human form. They came out of hiding, powered by the Holy Spirit Jesus had promised. They couldn't stop talking about their Master—ALIVE!

Now, you may be skeptical of the angel and earthquake (though these are known to occur in that area). But you have to admit, SOMETHING changed these men and women. Jesus had been dead—it was *so over*. Then he was alive?! The Lord they loved was alive?! You mean, it's not over, their lives are not wasted, death has been defeated, and they need fear it no more?!

The early Christians were clear: Jesus was “crucified, dead and buried”, the Apostles Creed says--“crucified” (dead), “dead” (really dead) “and buried” (very, very dead). But by God's power, Jesus was alive, and showed up for many people—hundreds, over the space of a few days, according to the record.

What do you think? You be the judge. Strobel's evidence, by any reasonable standard of criminal law, overwhelmingly supports the Bible records. It happened.

And the thing is, it keeps happening. Jesus keeps showing up for people. He showed up for me, starting when I was about 4 years old, and then every so often—as if there was a picture of a crowd in front of me, and one of those faces in the crowd was looking at me, smiling, and waving. God came to me Friday morning in a dream that would not let me sleep. He wanted to teach me something about myself, something that was not pleasant to recognize. God has taken me on this path of leading people to know Him and love Him and join Him in what God is doing here in Auburn.

Is God tugging at you, tugging your heart as well as your head? Lee Strobel's book is pretty head-oriented. It's all about the evidence (both eyewitness testimony and circumstantial corroboration). Strobel's authorities weigh the probabilities. It's a rather dispassionate sifting of evidence to come to a verdict.

But there is another thread in Strobel's book—something was happening to him as he was conducting his research. His wife had become a follower of Jesus, which frightened him and irritated him as well. In fact, he says, his whole research effort had been motivated by a deep desire to prove her and her friends wrong. The evidence began to accumulate, and it wasn't coming out as Strobel had assumed it would.

Another powerful force that was working on him was the change he witnessed in his wife's behavior since becoming a follower of Jesus. She did not preach at Lee, or nag him to go to church. She simply changed before his eyes. Over these months of meeting with women from her church, she became more patient, more kind, more sensitive, and with a kind of poise and peace Lee had not seen in her before. Her Christian faith was clearly making a difference in her life.

At the end of his research, Strobel concluded it would take more faith to maintain his atheist position than to believe the assertions Christians have made about Jesus for centuries.

But it would not do to leave Jesus back then, as an itinerant apocalyptic preacher in first century Palestine. Strobel got out a pad of paper and started writing out the consequences and implications that were now pressing in on him. Let me use his words:

“If Jesus is the Son of God, then his words are more than good ideas from a wise teacher; they are divine insights on which I can confidently build my life.

“If Jesus sets the standard for morality, [then] I can have an unwavering foundation for my choices and decisions, rather than basing them on the ever-shifting sands of expediency and self-centeredness.

“If Jesus did rise from the dead, [then] he is still alive today and available for me to encounter on a personal basis.

“If Jesus conquered death, [then] he can open the door of eternal life for me, too.

“If Jesus has divine power, [then] he has the supernatural ability to guide me and help me and transform me as I follow him.” [Strobel had seen that in his wife.]

“If Jesus personally knows the pain of loss and suffering, [then] he can comfort and encourage me in the midst of the turbulence that he himself warned is inevitable in a world corrupted by sin.

“If Jesus loves me as he says, [then] he has my best interests at heart. That means I have nothing to lose and everything to gain by committing myself to him and his purposes.

“If Jesus is who he claims to be (and remember no leader of any other major religion has ever pretended to be God), [then] as my Creator he rightfully deserves my allegiance, obedience, and worship.” (pp. 360-361, *The Case for Christ*)

Lee had come to a point of decision. What he did is what you can do: believe, receive and become. Lee now had to believe what he had uncovered: that Jesus, out of love for Lee, did die to pay for the way Lee had lived his life at a distance from God. “The evidence of history and of my own experience was too strong to ignore,” he said. (p. 362)

As for “receive”, it means taking for yourself this gift God is giving you—a reconciliation and new relationship with God, with that separation of sin swept away. Jesus has done that for you. Lee notes that every other religion he studied while in college works on the “do” plan—through ritual, or good works, or righteous thoughts, devotees were trying to work their way back to God. Christianity is unique. It is based on the “done” plan. What Jesus has done applies to your life and mine, for we could never be good enough to meet the standard of perfection it takes to live in God’s presence. Jesus did it; you receive it.

And as for “become”, let me again use Strobel’s words. “Said the Apostle Paul [in his second letter to the Corinthians], ‘If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come.’ Sure enough [he says], as I endeavored to follow Jesus’ teachings and open myself to his transforming power, my priorities, my values and my character were (and continue to be) gradually changed. I want Jesus’ motives and perspective to be my own. To paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., I may not yet be the man I should be, or the man—with Christ’s help—I someday will be—but thank God I’m not the man I used to be.” (p. 364)

And as if to prove it, Strobel's five-year-old daughter Alison, a few months after Lee became a follower of Jesus, went up to Lee's wife and said, "Mommy, I want God to do for me what he's done for Daddy." (ibid.) You be the judge.

Do you sense that your life has rather settled into a "same old, same old" rut, that there is no purpose you can see beyond paying the bills? Or are you in crisis now—in your marriage, your parenting, or in some other particular part of your life, or the whole thing? Have you have run out of rope and run out of hope? Have you been holding on to a distance from God out of fear, or anger, or resentment or hurt and disappointment?

Maybe God is nudging you to make a change. It's a big change—we're talking your whole life here, physical life and eternal life. But it starts with a little change—believe, receive, and become. That's what Christians do; we also seek to become--with God's help--more like Jesus in his life for and with God. This is a big deal.

Now, everyone, take out that card you got in your bulletin. As you leave today, I want a card from everyone, please. If you would you like to start on that path with Jesus today, and become a whole new woman or man, go ahead and print your name and your contact information on this card. (There's a pen attached to the seat in front of you, with a Velcro strip.) If this is not for you, then leave the card blank, please—or write out some other comment if you like. With everyone holding a card, it will be easier to be honest, and that's what I long for—don't you?

Some of you here do want to claim this belief in Jesus, receive the gift he bought for you, and become more like him in love and life.

Here's what I invite you to do. I'm going to pray the kind of prayer I would say—just talking with God—that I would help each of you pray, if I were sitting right next to you. I'll pause after each phrase, and you silently say the same phrase to God. As we sing our last song, please just write your name and contact information on the (blue card) you got in your bulletin today. Give it to me at the door, or to an usher, or put it in the "treasure box" on the ushers' table in the back.

Let's bow our heads so that those who are ready for this step can have the freedom to pray without being watched in their tender moment with God.

"O God, I believe:

I believe Jesus died for me, so I can live with You.

I believe my sins have created a giant gap.

I believe Jesus was Your Son.

I believe He went to die on the cross.

I believe His death overcame that gap.

O God, I receive:

I receive this gift of Jesus' life and death for me.

I receive the Holy Spirit to draw me to You.

O God, I want to become:

I want to become Jesus' disciple

I want to become a person You'd be proud to call Your Child.

Thank You, God, for Your great love.

In Jesus. Amen.”

If this is your heart's prayer, give me your name and contact information, so we can welcome you into God's Forever Family. This is a big deal. We want to cherish this with you, and help you get started on this new life with us and God.

“[Praise the] God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1 Peter 1:3, RSV)

Hallelujah!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on Resurrection Day, March 23, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]