

## **THE EASTER FACT**

### **Matthew 28**

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

Children are sometimes the first to grasp an essential fact. I recently read about an eight year old Sunday School Class in a Methodist church. This class had as one of its members Phillip who was born a mongoloid. Like most children born this way, he was pleasant and happy, but was increasingly becoming aware of the difference between himself and the other children.

On the Sunday after Easter the Sunday School teacher took a creative approach to the lesson for the day. He gave each of the children a container in which ladies hose had come, the kind that looks like an egg. She took the nine children present that day, including Phillip, outside and asked them to find something that reminded them of new life. When they had found it they were to put it in the egg like container. It was an exciting search for the children.

When they came back into the classroom each child put his egg like container on the table.

Then the teacher began to open them one by one and to allow the child to explain why they had picked what they picked. One girl had put a flower in her container. Another child had put a butterfly in the container. All of the girls exclaimed, "Beautiful." The teacher opened another container that had a rock. The third graders exclaimed, "That's crazy! How is a rock suppose to be like new life?" The smart little boy whose egg contained the rock spoke up. He said, "That's mine. I knew all of you would get flowers, buds, leaves, and butterflies, and stuff like that. So I got a rock because I wanted to be different. For me, that's new life."

When the teacher opened the next one, it was empty. The other children, as eight year old will, said, "That's not fair - that's stupid! Somebody didn't do it right."

About that time the teacher felt a tug on his sleeve and he looked down and Phillip was standing beside him. "It's mine!" Phillip said. "It's mine." The children said, "You don't ever do things right, Phillip." There's nothing there!"

"I did do it," Phillips said. "I did do it! It is empty - the tomb is empty!"

From that day forward the children began to see Philip in the new light. It was obvious in his own limited way that he had understood the central fact of Easter. When he died a few months later, his classmates gathered around and remembered together the day he brought the empty egg.

The event behind Easter is a fact! It is not a myth. It is not a fairy tale. It is not a parable. It is not a story. It is a fact. The event that we call the Easter Story is really a little piece of history. Jesus of Nazareth was triumphantly raised from the dead.

If you have difficulty accepting this as a historical fact, let me suggest that you consider ten supporting pieces of evidence. These ten supporting pieces of evidence should compel any thoughtful person to acknowledge that Jesus Christ does live. Before you buy into an

assumption that says a resurrection is scientifically impossible, make sure you have looked at the factual evidence.

## **I. THE PROMISE JESUS MADE.**

When the angel shared the good news with the women that Jesus was indeed risen, he reminded them of the promise that Jesus had made. "He is not here; He has risen, just as He said." "Just as He said" is a reference to the promises that Jesus made before He died.

In Matthew's gospel the first promise is found in chapter 12. "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a fish, so the son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). It might be argued that this is not a clear promise that He will be raised from the dead. Because of his reference to the experience of Jonah in the Old Testament, it might be interpreted in some other way. However, the other references in the gospel of Matthew leave no doubt.

In a context in which He is warning His disciples about the sufferings that lie ahead He said to them, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Matthew 16:21). It was the memory of the disciples that He had distinctly promised to be raised on the third day.

In the next chapter we have another statement of promise that is in a direct quotation. "When

they came together in Galilee He said to them, the Son of Man is going to be betrayed in to the hands of men. They will kill Him, and on the third day He will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief. Even though the disciples did not understand what He was saying, he did make a clear prediction that He would be raised to life on the third day.

The last reference in Matthew's gospel is another direct quotation. "The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priest and the teachers of the law. They will condemn Him to death and will turn Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day He will be raised to life! (Matthew 20:18-19)

According to the gospel of Matthew Jesus made four distinct, clear predictions concerning his resurrection from the dead on the third day. This is a fact that you must consider.

## **II. THE WITNESS OF THE ANGEL**

Matthew records a specific testimony given by an angel at the empty tomb. In Matthew's account of the resurrection event, the witness was given to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who went to the tomb early on Sunday morning. The appearance of the angel was frightening and overwhelming. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; He has risen, just as He said, Come and see the place where He lay. Then, go quickly and tell his disciples: He has risen from the dead is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him. Now I have told you" (Matthew 28:5-7).

In the context of scriptures angels are understood to be trustworthy witnesses. They were used by God to bring messages on important occasions. An angel's witness was the same as the witness of God Himself. We have a recorded witness of a heavenly visitor that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. This is a second historical fact that you must consider.

### **III. THE EMPTY TOMB**

Each of the gospels bear witness to this central fact - the tomb was empty. In Matthew's gospel the angel invites the women to look into the empty tomb and see for themselves that Jesus was not there. In Mark's gospel the women actually went into the tomb itself and saw that the body was not there. In Luke's account of the same event not only did the women find the tomb empty but Simon Peter also looked into the tomb and found it empty. In John's gospel the Apostle John is added to the list of those who actually looked into the tomb and saw that it was empty.

There is unanimity among all the witnesses that the tomb was empty on Sunday morning. The body had been placed in the tomb in the presence of a number of witnesses on Friday afternoon. It had been under guard by a company of soldiers assigned by pilot since Friday afternoon. Yet, on Sunday morning the tomb is empty. This is another fact that must be considered.

### **IV. THE APPEARANCES OF JESUS**

Each of the four gospels record a number of appearances of Jesus after His resurrection. In Matthew's gospel He makes His first appearance to the women. "Suddenly Jesus met them. Greetings, He said. They came to Him, clasped His feet and worshiped Him" (Matthew 28:9).

Matthew closes His account of the resurrection by reporting His meeting with the eleven disciples in Galilee. While He met with them in Galilee He gave them what we call the Great Commission. Mark reports the appearance to Mary Magdalene as well as with the eleven.

Luke reports an appearance to two disciples that were traveling to Emmaus. He also reports that He met with Simon Peter as well as all of the disciples.

John reports that He met with the disciples in the upper room on Sunday evening, and then met with them in the same room a week later, and then met with some of them in Galilee sometime later after they had fished all night.

The Apostle Paul includes himself among the eye witnesses that were privileged to see Jesus after His resurrection. He also has a reference to His meeting with more than five hundred people on one occasion.

What we are dealing with is a series of eye witness accounts to actually seeing, hearing, and in some cases touching Jesus after He was raised from the dead. This is a fact worthy of your consideration.

## **V. THE SURPRISE OF THE DISCIPLES**

The resurrection event caught all of the disciples by surprise. Even though Jesus had spoken about the event on several occasions, none of them expected it. They thought that His death on Friday was the end of everything. Even when they saw Him, Matthew reports that "some

doubted." The two that walked with Him to Emmaus are typical of the surprise of those disciples. Rather than being a group that would be inclined to put together a plot to lead others to believe that He had been raised from the dead, the disciples themselves had given up. It was over for them. The resurrection of Jesus caught them totally by surprise.

## **VI. THE HELPLESSNESS OF THE OPPOSITION**

Matthew has an interesting reference to an attempt on the part of the enemies of Jesus to explain the absence of the body. They actually bribed the soldiers with money so that they would say that the disciples had stolen away the body while they were asleep.

The enemies of Jesus could have stopped all of the reports about His resurrection very easily. All they had to do was to produce the body. They were never able to find the dead body of Jesus. They could have stopped the whole movement at any point by just producing the dead body.

Neither the Jews nor the Romans could ever come up with any evidence that would support their claim that Jesus' body had been stolen. Their frustration and inability to produce a dead body is a piece of evidence that you must consider.

## **VII. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE DISCIPLES**

The impact of that the resurrection event had on the disciples, was nothing short of miraculous. They were transformed into a courageous, effective movement that swept across the world.

Before the resurrection of Jesus on that Sunday morning they were defeated, fearful, hiding, and in a state of utter despair.

After personal encounters with Him over a period of forty days, they were transformed into a force that all the powers of the pagan and Roman world could not stop. Nothing short of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead can explain this transformation.

### **VIII. THE WRITING OF THE GOSPELS**

These four documents that we call the gospels are a witness to the resurrection of Jesus. The four gospels were written in a period of time in which many of the personalities involved in the events were still alive. Many of the citizens in Jerusalem who were there that Passover season were still living in Jerusalem. Many of those who were among the 500 that saw Him after His resurrection were also alive. If these documents did not represent what really happened it would have been easy to find folks that would refute them.

There was no inclination on the part of any of the disciples to do anything about reporting the life of Jesus until after He was raised from the dead. These documents would have never have been written if the events recorded in the last chapter of each of the gospels had not occurred.

### **IX. THE FORMATION OF THE CHURCH**

Along side the empty tomb the church itself is probably the greatest witness to the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. If He had not been raised from the dead there would have been no



church. What is reported in the book of Acts would never have happened if Jesus had not been raised from the dead. That early group of disciples came together around the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and made a commitment to Him and to each other that began Christian history. The church of Jesus Christ stands in the midst of history as an irrefutable piece of evidence that Jesus was raised from the dead.

## **X. OUR EXPERIENCE**

I would not put my experience with Jesus Christ along side the empty tomb or the other pieces of evidence that I have cited, but I must include it. I have personally encountered the living presence of the living Christ in a way that has made an eternal difference in my life. While it will not have any lasting value as a piece of evidence to you if you are skeptic, I cannot be silent.

I must testify that He is risen.

What does it all mean. If we are dealing with an Easter fact, what is the significance of that fact?

The Easter fact declares that Jesus is Lord. This is first and primary. The risen Christ is Lord! He is the Lord of life and death! He is the Lord of all men! He is the supreme reality with whom you and I must deal.

The Easter fact declares that death is conquered. Since Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, death has been conquered. He holds the keys of death and the grave in His hand. He is in a

position to offer eternal life to all who will put their faith in Him. He is able to deliver from the fear of death.

The Easter fact bears witness to the completion of our salvation. Since He was raised from the dead everything has been done that needs to be done to make the forgiveness of sin possible.

Since He is alive He is able to save unto the uttermost all of those who come unto God by Him.

In light of this Easter fact, I invite you to make an Easter commitment to Jesus, the Son of God.

I invite you to do what one of His earliest disciples did. Thomas who was bothered with doubts about the Easter fact. When he became convinced that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead bowed before Him and exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" I invite you to do that this morning.