

“EVIDENCE THAT DEMANDS A VERDICT”

(John 20:19-31)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 4-24-11]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY]: Read NRSV Text John 20:19-31 and Pray.
2. Several years ago, “The Discovery Channel” aired a show called “The Lost Tomb of Jesus,” in which film maker Simcha Jacobovici and producer James Cameron explored a claim that the human remains of Jesus of Nazareth, along with several members of his family, had been found and positively identified.

A–The film described the 1980 discovery of a cave outside Jerusalem containing boxes of human bones (called “ossuaries”) marked with names that – in the right combination – seem to suggest...

B–...that when Jesus died, he *didn’t* rise from the dead (as Christians have proclaimed for 2000 years) but that instead...he stayed dead, and that his bones are there to “prove” it! ¹
3. Now, of course, many people (including those in the archaeological community) have taken exception to the extravagant claims of this show. ²

A–And yet, regardless of what we think about these claims, they nevertheless *do* raise interesting questions for us as Christians.

B–For example: Was the resurrection of Jesus the most elaborate, cleverly conceived *hoax* ever in human history? OR was it an actual *fact*?

C–And what difference *would* it make in our faith if it *were* true that Jesus’ dead body was found and positively identified?
4. Well, at least to Thomas in today’s scripture, it evidently mattered a great deal that Jesus was truly raised from the dead.
[Contemp. Service ONLY]: Let me read you his story... (Read from MSG: John 20:19-31)

A–Remember Verse 25 says that Thomas said he would not believe “*unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and put my hand in his side.*”

B–Now, history has given Thomas a hard time about his need for evidence to “prove” Jesus’ resurrection – we call him “*doubting Thomas*,” implying he didn’t have enough faith.

C–But are any of us really any different? Don’t we today quite often say that we have to *see* things *first* before we’ll *believe* them?

5. Even yet, I want us to notice in today's story that in response to Thomas' skepticism (which often mirrors our own) Jesus *doesn't* rebuke Thomas, but instead invites him to touch the nail-holes in his hands and to touch his spear-pierced side.

A—So, if anything, Jesus' actions affirm that when our questions and doubts are offered in the right spirit, they *can* be a great tool to help us grow and develop in our spiritual life – that God is not afraid of our questions and doubts.

B—So whatever you think of Jacobovici's claims, I believe the questions they raise *can* help us grow in our faith.

C—With that in mind, then, let's take some time today to explore just a bit of the evidence we have in support of the reality of Jesus' resurrection [*Read Bulletin Sermon Notes*].

–II–

6. First of all, "The Lost Tomb" claims notwithstanding, I *still* believe that the first piece of evidence we have in support of the actual resurrection of Jesus is **the empty tomb** itself.

A—Now, over the years various explanations have been given as to *why* Jesus' tomb was empty on Easter morning.³

B—Some have suggested that the *Disciples stole the body* and invented the resurrection story.

1—Yet, could it be reasonably argued that a band of timid, frightened men (who feared for their *own* lives) would dare to confront the Roman guards who'd been given strict orders to prevent just such an occurrence?⁴

2—And although some say that the guards fell asleep, to do so while on duty meant death in the Roman military, and even if they *were* sleeping, surely the rolling away of the stone by the Disciples would have woken the guards up.

C—Well, then, perhaps the *Jewish or Roman authorities moved it*.

1—But what I want to know is: what possible benefit could be gained by that? If anything, that would've played right into Jesus' own prophecy about his resurrection.

2—And even if it *were* true that they moved the body, then when the disciples started preaching/teaching that Jesus was raised, why didn't they simply produce the body and stop the lie right then and there?

D—So perhaps either the tomb's owner (Joseph of Arimathea), or other members of Jesus' *family* (like his brother James) *moved the body* to a "family" tomb outside Jerusalem, where nearly 2,000 years later, his bones are supposedly "discovered."

1–But remember that Joseph, though a member of the Sanhedrin, was also a secret follower of Jesus – as such, it seems unlikely that he would have moved the body *without* telling the Disciples; at the very least, the Roman guards would have known.

2–The same would be true if Jesus' *family* had moved his body – they would have told the Disciples what they'd done, and you'd *still* have to show how they broke into the tomb without the guards knowing.

3–And even if his family *had* moved the body, how could they (poor as they were) afford their own “family tomb” as the film suggests? (tombs were expensive, after all = for the rich) And even if they had (or had one donated to them), then *WHY* would they want one in *Jerusalem*, when their ancestral home was *Nazareth*? ⁵

E–Well, others have suggested that *the women went to the wrong tomb*.

1–But keep in mind that the scriptures are explicit in telling us that the women had been careful to notice where and how the body had been laid. ⁶

2–And, would this imply that Peter & John, as well as the angel who in Matthew 28:6 pointed to “*the place where the Lord lay*” also went to the wrong tomb?

3–And even if all (or any) of this were true, then why didn't the Jewish/Roman authorities, or Joseph of Arimathea, or Jesus' family simply go to the *right* tomb and produce the body? ⁷

F–You see, these are just some of these reasons I believe that the empty tomb itself, despite the bizarre claims of Cameron and Jacobovici, is still the first great evidence of the reality of Jesus' resurrection. ⁸

7. But even if it weren't, we need to remember that the empty tomb is *not* the *only* piece of evidence that Jesus was raised. No. A second one is **the transformed lives of the Disciples**.⁹

A–Tradition says that every one of the 12 Disciples (except John) faced a martyr's death for preaching Jesus' resurrection faith and truth.

1–So we've got to ask: Would the Disciples (or anybody else, for that matter) be willing to die for something that they *knew* to be a lie? Probably not!

2–You see, the Disciples themselves must have *truly* believed that Jesus was raised from the dead, because they based their entire Christian message upon that belief.¹⁰

B–And even if they'd just been misguided or delusional, then surely the Jewish and Roman authorities who wanted to suppress early Christianity would've publically boasted about the existence of Jesus' bones had they actually existed somewhere – they would've done almost *anything* to “prove” the resurrection stories were lies.

C–But no such response occurred, and so we’re left with the firm convictions & miraculously transformed lives of the Disciples as evidence in support of Jesus’ resurrection.

8. Last of all, though, I believe that **the reality of Christian faith today** is also proof that the resurrection of Jesus really occurred.

A–It’s been said that “*The best argument for the historical truth of Jesus’ resurrection is that we are discussing it 2000 years later!*”¹¹

1–Author Frederick Buechner put it this way, “*Unless something very real indeed took place on that strange, confused [Easter] morning, there would be no New Testament, no Church, [and] no Christianity.*”¹²

2–He’s saying that an *ordinary* death and burial (even of an *extraordinary* man) would *not* have resulted in all the things that followed Jesus’ death and burial.

B–For the past 2000 years, people have encountered the living Christ & had their hearts and lives touched and transformed by his *living* presence – including many of us here today.

1–It’s true that it’s not something that can be scientifically or empirically “proven.”

2–But, as anyone who’s truly experienced it will tell, it *is* nevertheless real!¹³

–III–

9. (#1) An empty tomb; (#2) the transformed lives of the Disciples; and (#3) the lives of those of us who are Christians here today.... all of this is “***Evidence that Demands a Verdict.***”

A–And while I’ll be the first to admit that rational proofs for Christian faith (like these) will only take us so far,...

B–...Nevertheless when we allow them to call forth and complement faith and belief (as Thomas did), then they can help *US* to exclaim as he did in Verse 28, (MSG) “*My Master! My God!*” (NRSV) “*My Lord and my God!*”

10. [PRAY]

11. [SUGGESTED CLOSING SONGS: *My Savior Lives* (Gateway Worship); or UMH#310, “*He Lives*”]

ENDNOTES:

1. The show first aired on “The Discovery Channel” on March 4, 2007. Read more about the film at www.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lost_Tomb_of_Jesus.

2. For example, Jacobovici's claims were first introduced in popular media, instead of first being submitted to the rigorous review of archeology and academic scholarship. And it's also been pointed out that the archeologists who *did* research the original discovery back in 1980 found nothing remarkable or noteworthy, and that it wasn't until 2002 that Jacobovici found another artifact that convinced him to popularize his claim. But even Jacobovici acknowledges that the names on the cave ossuaries (including the name of Jesus and several others known to have existed in his family circle) were extremely common in first-century Palestine. Andrey Feuerverger, a statistician at the University of Toronto, calculated that even in the right combination of names, the likelihood that this cave was the "family" cave of the "Holy Family" was only 600-to-1, or "*not very likely*" (See March 5, 2007 Newsweek article "Raiders of the Lost Tomb," p. 62). And even these odds, he acknowledges, are accurate "*only if several assumptions are made*" in advance, such as the identities of several of the names [See Mike Poteet, "Looking at the Lost Tomb," in the e-curriculum LinC: Living in Christ (Volume 13, Number 13, April 1, 2007), page 5].

3. Remember that at least one of these explanations for the empty tomb needs to be true in order for the "Lost Tomb" scenario to be correct – this is true because in order for Jesus' bones to be found in a "family tomb" (as claimed by the "Lost Tomb" film), one first has to explain how they got from the original tomb (which scripture clearly says was a tomb that did *not* belong either to Jesus or his family) to this one.

4. Read Matthew 27:62-66.

5. To date, archeologists have discovered over 900 "family" tombs in the modern Jerusalem area, and the "lost tomb" in question is thought to have been used by over 3-4 generations in the first century A.D. This alone makes it highly unlikely that this tomb would belong to a family whose ancestral home was (and continued to be after Jesus's death) in *Nazareth*.

6. Read Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:46-47; Luke 23:50-55.

7. In addition to the empty tomb issues, some have argued that Jesus' resurrection appearances were merely **hallucinations**. But in addition to the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection appearances to the twelve Disciples, I Corinthians 15:5 tells us that he also appeared to over 500 people after the resurrection. So if these appearances were mere "hallucinations," then what's the likelihood that they were experienced by *so many different* people, in *so many different* times, and in *so many different* places, none of whom were connected to the nostalgic, emotional atmosphere of the crucifixion (an atmosphere that might be conducive to hallucinations of what one *wanted* to see)?

8. In the end, the comments of Jewish Rabbi Marc Gellman, quoting from his Newsweek column, summarize my own feelings about the "Lost Tomb" claims, as well:

*"The proofs offered in the film leave me unimpressed. Why would a prominent archeologist [from the original 1980 discovery] overlook the names clearly inscribed on the stone bone boxes? How do we know the inscriptions are not fakes? Why would followers of Jesus, who needed to maintain the belief that he had been physically resurrected, allow his name to be written on his coffin? How do we know that this is his family tomb and not the tomb of others with the same names? **Too many questions and too many financial motivations exist to convince me that a real case has been made**"* (From a Newsweek article quoted in MSNBC, March 7, 2007)

For other online articles about "The Lost Tomb" claims, See <http://documentaries.about.com/b/a/256925.htm>, <http://documentaries.about.com/od/issues/a/losttombofjesus.htm>; <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17349123>; <http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/tomb/tomb.html>.

9. Now, while it's true that the Disciples didn't receive *power* to share the good news about Jesus until *Pentecost*, the resurrection nevertheless *did* give them a *foundation* for the gospel that they would preach.
10. “*The earliest Christians had no reason to lie about Jesus’ resurrection. In fact, proclaiming its truth caused them trouble and sometimes cost them their lives. They spoke because they knew it to be true*” [Mike Poteet, “Looking at the Lost Tomb,” in the e-curriculum LinC: Living in Christ (Volume 13, Number 13, April 1, 2007), page 3].
11. Mike Poteet, “Looking at the Lost Tomb,” in the e-curriculum LinC: Living in Christ (Volume 13, Number 13, April 1, 2007), page 3.
12. Author and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner, The Magnificent Defeat, p. 78.
13. In his article from Newsweek magazine, Jewish Rabbi Marc Gellman (notice, not a Christian, but a person of faith, nevertheless) had this to say in summarizing his observations about the actual resurrection of Jesus in light of the “The Lost Tomb” claims: “*Sometimes you just have to stand up and say, ‘This is not just a good, old story. This is true and it sustains me with every breath I take. Take your best shot, but **I not only stand by the story, I stand in the story**’*” (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17501882/site/newsweek).