

EASTER MORNING

John 20:1-18

Have you ever noticed how stories tend to get changed in the retelling. Something happens and the news quickly spreads by word of mouth. Details tend to get added or left out in each retelling. After the story passes through several people though, the details often get changed to the point that we hear from different people, different versions of the same event.

This fact might help us to understand the differences in the accounts of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ that are recorded in the Gospels. As we examine these accounts, we find that each is somewhat different in the details that are recorded.

Who came to the tomb that first Easter morning? When did they come? Why did they come? What did they see? The answers to such questions will vary according to which Gospel we happen to be reading. I guess that we should not be surprised at such differences. Such differences in detail might be just what would be expected as the story of that very confusing and exciting morning was retold. That being the case, the differences actually add to the story. If the story were exactly the same in each Gospel, we would probably have more reason to doubt whether the events of that first Easter Sunday morning actually happened.

Although there are some differences in the details recorded, the basic facts appear strikingly similar. With the assistance of the influential Joseph of Arimathea, the body of Jesus was given a hasty burial on Friday evening, before the Sabbath began at sundown. Following the Sabbath rest imposed by Jewish Law,

some women followers came about dawn on Sunday morning to discover the stone removed from the tomb entrance and the body of Jesus gone. Their initial reaction was one of bewilderment and fear. A mysterious figure or figures at the tomb, told them that Jesus was risen. They left that tomb and told others, but it seems that at first even Jesus' closest followers were totally surprised by what seemed to have happened.

The Biblical record is clear that the tomb of Jesus was empty that Sunday morning. But that in itself does not constitute proof that the resurrection actually happened. Any number of possibilities could explain the disappearance of the body of Jesus, including the story reportedly spread by the leadership in the Jewish Church, that the disciples had come and stolen His body away. If this were the case, it is somewhat surprising that the authorities did not find the body. If they had, the claims that Jesus had risen could easily have been refuted. Nonetheless, the fact that the tomb was empty serves only to prove that the body of Jesus was no longer there.

Neither the empty tomb nor the report of figures at the tomb really seemed to convince the disciples that Jesus was risen from the dead. They needed more compelling evidence. They had to encounter the Risen Christ. Jesus had to appear to them. While the reports again differ in details, several appearances have been recorded in the scriptures. These appearances over a period of time seem to have been granted only to those who were close followers. And it was these experiences, rather than the empty tomb itself, that convinced the apostles that Jesus had indeed risen. These experiences also seemed to transform them with courage and conviction to go and tell others the Good News. After the Ascension, when these appearances had ceased, something else seemed to have sustained the faith of these

apostles in the face of tremendous opposition. Their sense of the abiding presence of the Lord and the power of His resurrection enabled them to go forth against incredible odds and bring to birth the Christian Church to which we belong. Their powerful witness enabled others who had not shared their experience, to come to the same belief, and the church grew. The continued growth of that church in the face of so much opposition and indifference throughout the intervening centuries, is perhaps the most convincing evidence of all, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and He is Lord.

The resurrection of Christ, which we celebrate today, is the climax of God's great plan of salvation. The only real witnesses were those who were there to see Him die and yet live. Their witness has been recorded in the Gospels and the New Testament as a whole. Each succeeding generation has had to go back to that apostolic witness and make their own faith response. Each of us has to review the evidence and decide for ourselves. We each have to come to our own Easter faith. Taken together, the Biblical record and the experience of individual believers, and indeed the whole church, provide compelling evidence that Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Believe it, experience His risen power and share this Good News, so that others, too, may believe and be saved, both today and in generations still to come.

AMEN.