

DID HE OR DIDN'T HE? (Matthew 28:1-15)

The date was March 21, 1980. That was the night that the hit TV show Dallas concluded its second season. The season ended with a cliffhanger. One of the show's main characters, the Ewing family's eldest son, J.R. was shot by an unknown assailant. J.R. was the kind of character you loved to hate. For months, the viewing public asked the question: "Who shot J.R.?" The list of those with a motive to shoot J.R. was long.

Due to a Screen Actor's Guild strike, it was eight months before that question was answered. Then, on November 21, 1980, the viewing public got to see for themselves who it was who did what many secretly wanted to do. The question, "Who shot J.R.?" was finally answered.

I got to thinking this past week about many of the famous questions that have been asked on TV, in motion pictures, and in great literature. Since don't have time to look at all those forms of media, let's think about some well-known questions we have heard asked in TV commercials.

- In 1984, at the age of 81, Clara Peller was hired to do a series of commercials for the fast-food chain Wendy's. Her iconic line was: "Where's the beef?"
- In 1993, the California Milk Processor Board was looking for creative way to boost sales. They hired an advertising agency that struck gold. Over the years, they produced 70 commercials and ran 350 milk mustache ads that ran in national publications and on TV. During the time that ad campaign was active, it is estimated that on any given day, 80% of all U.S. consumers came into contact with their innocent, little question: "Got Milk?"
- In the 1980's, a series of commercials began that advertised an upscale mustard spread. In one such commercial, a Rolls Royce pulls up beside another Rolls Royce. Both widows roll down. An aristocratic voice asks, "Pardon me, would you have any Grey Poupon?" The reply comes, "But of course!" Then, you see a jar of Grey Poupon being passed from one vehicle to the other.
- There have been other questions we have heard in commercials. Back in January of 2002, Verizon started an ad campaign featuring the question: "Can you hear me now?" That campaign lasted almost a decade during which time they made about 100 commercials.
- Right now, Capital One is using Jennifer Garner and Samuel Jackson to ask us, "What's in your wallet?"

I have a question for us to consider today. It is prompted by today's text, and it is a question of supreme importance. My question is simply, "Did He or Didn't He?" Did Jesus rise from the dead or did He not? The answer to that question is not only life altering, it also determines our eternal destiny.

Let's read what the Scriptures say—Matthew 28:1-15. I want to sharpen the focus by asking and answering just two questions.

If Jesus Rose from the Dead, What Are We to Do?

In the passage before us, an angel tells some women what they are to do, and later they do something automatically without being prompted. I want to use those three things as a pattern for us to follow.

Let us get our bearings. Matthew tells us, “after the Sabbath.” The Sabbath began at sunset on Friday and ended at sunset on Saturday. Then, he tells us “toward the dawn of the first day of the week.” So, on Sunday, before the sun arose, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were on their way to the tomb. The other Mary would have been Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, which we met in Matthew 27:56. Mark adds that Salome, the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus was also in this group. They went to the tomb carrying spices. They wanted to further prepare Jesus’ body for burial. It had been hastily prepared on Friday by Joseph and Nicodemus before the sun set. The women knew they could do a much better job. As they made their way to the tomb, they wondered aloud who would move the stone away and allow them access to Jesus’ body (Mark 16:1-3).

It appears that by the time they arrived, the earthquake had already happened. The soldiers aren’t around because there is no one left for them to guard, and the stone has already been moved aside by the angel. In v. 5, the angel addresses the women. He says what it seems the angels had been trained to say. He said reassuringly, “Do not be afraid.”

If I walk into a room, I never say, “Do not be afraid” because people take one look at me and they know they have no reason to be afraid. But if you find yourself in the presence of a bright, shining, strong angel, you think you have good reason to be afraid; so, the angel basically says, “I mean you no harm, friend. Don’t be afraid.”

The angel goes on to tell that what one preacher claimed are eight words that changed the world: “He is not here for He has risen.”

Just before the angel proclaimed that message, he issued a command, “Come, see the place where He lay.” This forms the first thing we are to do.

1. We Are to Inspect the Evidence.

The evidence the angel offered to the women was an empty tomb. An empty tomb is strong, circumstantial evidence that something amazing has happened. The angel paired that with the reminder that Jesus said He was going to rise. Jesus forewarned His disciples no less than three times that He would suffer, be killed, and rise from the dead on the third day. The 1st time was in Matthew 16. The 2nd time was in Matthew 17, and the 3rd time was in Matthew 20.

An empty tomb really is strong evidence because if the authorities moved the body, they would have produced it once the rumor began to spread that Jesus was alive. If the disciples stole the body, you have to ask yourself, “Would they have chosen persecution and martyrdom for what they knew was a lie?” People will die for what they mistakenly believe, but they are not going to die for what they know is only a hoax.

At one time, Charles Colson was a powerful man. He was part of the Nixon administration and served as counsel to the president. He was involved in the Watergate coverup, was tried, convicted, and sent to prison. Through his fall, he came to faith in Jesus Christ. I once heard a presentation he made in which he claimed that Watergate proves the resurrection of Jesus. Listen to what he said:

Watergate involved a conspiracy perpetrated by the closest aides to the president of the United States—the most powerful men in America, who were intensely loyal to their president. But one of them, John Dean, turned state's evidence, that is, testified against Nixon, as he put it, "to save his own skin"—and he did so only two weeks after informing the president about what was really going on—two weeks! The cover-up, the lie, could only be held together for two weeks, and then everybody else jumped ship in order to save themselves. Now, the fact is all that those around the president were facing was embarrassment, maybe prison. Nobody's life was at stake.

But what about the disciples? Twelve powerless men, peasants really, were facing not just embarrassment or political disgrace, but beatings, stonings, execution. Every single one of the disciples insisted, to their dying breaths, that they had physically seen Jesus bodily raised from the dead. Don't you think that one of those apostles would have cracked before being beheaded or stoned? That one of them would have made a deal with the authorities? None did. Men will give their lives for something they believe to be true; they will never give their lives for something they know to be false.

The best thing you can do for your own spiritual growth and strength is to become convinced of the reality that Jesus rose from the dead, that He is alive today.

2. *We Are to Proclaim His Message.*

After telling the women, "Come and see," the angel added, "Go and tell." Specifically, they were told to tell the disciples that Jesus had arisen from the dead and that He would meet them in Galilee. They were to go to Galilee where they would see Jesus alive.

I love v. 8. The women were immediately obedient to the task they were given. They went to tell the disciples, and they went with *fear* and *great joy*.

Fear and great joy are an odd combination, but that is a perfect description of how we usually approach the task of evangelism. We are familiar with the *fear* part, but if we will press on, we will get over the fear, and we will experience the *great joy* part.

Some years ago, Max Lucado wrote about what the disciples experienced soon after Jesus was crucified and what happened when they learned He had risen.

The door is locked. Deadbolted. Maybe even a chair under the doorknob. Inside sit ten knee-knocking itinerants who are astraddle the fence between faith and fear.

As you look around the room, you wouldn't take them for a bunch who are

about to put the kettle of history on high boil. Uneducated. Confused. Calloused hands. Heavy accents. Few social graces. Limited knowledge of the world. No money. Undefined leadership. And on and on.

No, as you look at this motley crew, you wouldn't wager too many paychecks on their future. But something happens to a man when he witnesses someone who has risen from the dead. Something stirs within the soul of a man who stood within inches of God. Something stirs that is hotter than gold fever and more permanent than passion.

It all started with ten stammering, stuttering men. Though the door was locked, He still stood in their midst. "As the Father has sent me. I am sending you."

And send then He did. Ports. Courtyards. Boats. Synagogues. Prisons. Palaces. They went everywhere. Their message of the Nazarene dominoed across the civilized world. They were an infectious fever. They were a moving organism. They refused to be stopped. Uneducated drifters who shook history like a housewife shakes a rug.

We, too, have been given a message to proclaim, and when we are convinced that Jesus is alive, and alive in us by His Spirit, we will be emboldened to proclaim the life-giving message of the gospel.

We are to inspect the evidence. We are to proclaim His message.

3. We Are to Worship the Savior.

Look at v. 9. Did you notice **when** Jesus showed up and presented Himself to the women? He made Himself known to them as they were doing what they had been called to do. It was their obedience that led to His revelation of Himself.

If you want a fresh experience with the Lord, do what He says. Then, when He shows up, worship Him.

You and I are so familiar with the story of Jesus—His life, His death, and His resurrection—that it fails to grab us it should and maybe as it once did. Every time we hear it, we should seek to listen to it as if it was our time to encounter this incredible story.

I once heard about some missionaries who were working among a tribe in the jungles of East Asia. These missionaries showed the people the *Jesus* film. That is a movie that uses live actors to depict the life of Jesus. Everything in the movie comes from Luke's gospel.

Not only had these people never heard of Jesus, they had never seen a motion picture. On one unforgettable evening, however, they saw it all. They saw and heard in their own language the story of Jesus. They saw a good man who went about doing good, who healed the sick, and who was loved by children and adored by multitudes.

They also saw how this good man was arrested, how He was mistreated by authorities, how He was beaten and taunted by soldiers. As they watched, they became enraged by the injustice of it all. They stood up and shouted at the cruel men on the screen. They demanded that this outrage stop.

When it didn't stop, they attacked the missionary running the projector. Maybe he was responsible for this injustice! He stopped the film, quieted the crowd, and explained that the story wasn't over yet. There was more they needed to see.

The crowd settled down, sat back down on the ground, and they tried to hold their emotions in check.

Then came the crucifixion. The people wept and wailed with such loud grief that again the film had to be stopped. Again, the missionary tried to calm them. He explained the story wasn't over yet. There was more.

Once again, the people calmed themselves. They sat down to see what would happen next.

Then came the resurrection. When Jesus rose from the dead, pandemonium broke out. Their joy was such that a party erupted. The jubilation was deafening. People were dancing, slapping each other on the back. Jesus had risen!

One final time, the missionary shut off the projector. He did not, however, tell them to calm down because all that was supposed to happen was now happening.

When you become aware that Jesus is alive, that Jesus conquered death, you can't help but praise and worship Him.

For just a moment, however, we have to consider the flip side.

If Jesus Didn't Rise from the Dead, What Does That Mean?

The religious authorities claimed that Jesus didn't really rise from the dead. According to Matthew's gospel, they gave money to the soldiers and instructed them to say that Jesus' disciples came while they were asleep and stole the body of Jesus.

One person claimed that story is about as believable as claiming that the dog ate your homework. Wouldn't you like to put one of those soldiers on the stand in a court of law and cross examine him. "Sir, in your sworn statement you claimed that Jesus' disciples came and stole his body while you and your comrades were all asleep while on duty. Is that correct?"

"Yes, it is."

"Well, I just have one question. If you were all asleep, how do you know that's what happened?"

Let's pretend for a moment that Matthew is the one who is making up stories, that the soldiers never made such a claim, that there was no angel who rolled away the stone and that Jesus didn't really rise from the dead. If that were the case, what would that mean?

That would mean that there is no hope beyond the grave, that we have no good news to proclaim. It would mean that we should shut down this thing called church, and we should all go home because we are wasting everyone's time and money.

I, however, am wagering my entire life and eternal destiny on the belief that Matthew got it right, as well as Mark, and Luke, and John, and Paul, and the other writers of the NT, as well as the millions and millions of Jesus followers who came before me. I believe that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

I close with the words of Tim Keller, a pastor and an author who lives and works in

New York City. He said:

We should be more sympathetic to our skeptical friends. The resurrection makes Christianity the most irritating religion on the face of the earth, and the reason is because of how people decide what they believe. They decide what they believe by reading it and saying, “I like it,” or “I don't like it.”

Over the years I've had so many people say, “Well, I could never be a Christian.”

I say, “Why?”

“Well, there are parts of the Bible I find offensive.”

I remember years ago it had to do with money. In my little church in Virginia, people were often offended by what the Bible said about money. Today in New York they are much more offended by what the Bible says about sex.

I usually say, “Let me ask you a question: Are you saying because there are parts of the Bible that you don't like, that Jesus Christ couldn't have been raised from the dead?”

They say, “Well, no, I guess I'm not saying that.”

I say, “Well, every part of the Bible is important, but would you please put the ethical teaching aside for a minute, and here's the point: If Jesus was raised from the dead, you're going to have to deal with everything in the Bible. If Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, I don't know why you're vexing yourself over that. But the fact of the matter is Paul was more offended by Christianity than you. He was killing Christians, and we don't advise that. But when he realized Jesus had been raised, it didn't matter what offended him anymore. It didn't matter, because it was true.”

And we have to keep that in mind. The resurrection is a paradigm-shattering historical event.

In other words, if Jesus didn't rise from dead, nothing in this book matters. If Jesus did rise from the dead, everything in this book matters, and we are going to have to deal with it.

So, did He or didn't He? I say, “He did.” What do you say?