

He Is Risen!

Why do you believe what you believe? Several years ago on April Fool's Day, the BBC aired a fake documentary about "spaghetti farming" in northern Italy. They interviewed peasant farmers raking spaghetti out of the trees where it supposedly grew. Hundreds of viewers wrote in to say "thank you," because they never knew that was where spaghetti came from.

Or, did you hear about the bogus article written by George Plimpton that appeared in *Sports Illustrated* about a fictitious monk named Sidd Finch, who had learned in a Tibetan monastery how to throw a baseball 168 miles per hour (the major league record is 101 mph)? Plimpton wrote that the Mets were giving him a secret tryout. A writer for the prestigious *New York Times* called Plimpton and asked, "That's not true, is it?"ⁱ

So, why do you believe what you believe? With all the false information out there today, on what basis can we believe the report that Jesus rose from the dead nearly 2000 years ago? Let's consider the answer to that important question together. The first step, of course, in any search for the truth is...

I. The Collecting of Facts

Mark makes it clear in his Gospel that women disciples were in the front row as witnesses to the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostle John describes that he also was there with Jesus' mother. Some of the other male disciples might have been there, but we know for sure that multiple women were there, including Mary the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Salome and "*many other women*" who "*cared for his needs*" during His ministry in Galilee (Mk. 15:41). In fact, the women who went to the tomb on Sunday morning knew where to go because v. 47 says they "*saw where he was laid.*"

Now, when it comes to the resurrection, again, it is the women who learn the truth first. They went early in the morning to anoint the body with spices. (Anointing, by the way, was different from "preparing" the body for burial. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus "prepared" the body, the women were coming to "anoint" the body.) They wondered how they were going to move the gigantic stone to do the anointing, but when they got there, the stone was already moved. They stepped into the tomb and were met by an angel who said to them:

"Don't be alarmed... You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" (Mark 16: 6, 7)

The women were given the great honor of learning first that Christ had been raised from the dead and they were then sent by the angel to inform the male disciples. Isn't this often the way it is? How many men first became aware of the reality of Jesus' power for life today through a woman? It was true of Lee Strobel. Lee was an investigative journalist with the Chicago Tribune, but he was living far

from God. He said, "I thought the idea of an all-loving, all-powerful creator... was stupid... I was the legal editor of the Chicago Tribune. So I needed evidence before I'd believe anything."

One day, his wife, who had been an agnostic, said that after a period of investigation, she had decided to become a follower of Jesus Christ. Lee said his first thought was, "Oh no! She's going to turn into a sexually repressed prude who spends all her time serving the poor on skid row! My marriage is over!"

But over the months that followed, that didn't happen. What he did see were changes that were winsome, that were attractive. She was a better mom and a better wife. She invited him to attend church with her and he went mostly to see if he could get her out of this "cult." But instead, he heard a message about Jesus that was inviting and compelling. He walked out saying, "If this is true, this has huge implications for my life."

So, Lee applied his legal journalism skills to an extensive investigation of the credibility of Christianity. It took him a year and nine months. In the end, he decided:

"...to be an atheist I would have to swim upstream against this torrent of evidence pointing toward the truth of Jesus Christ. And I couldn't do that. I was trained in journalism and law to respond to truth. And so on that day, I received Jesus Christ as my forgiver, and as my leader." ⁱⁱ (Lee Strobel)

The first step in deciding what you believe is to collect the facts. The second step is to...

II. Respond Courageously

Humor can have a real benefit in a society. In the middle of a dreary or even painful life, a dash of humor or a practical joke can lighten the load and even help you put things in a better perspective. But a steady diet of humor, especially practical jokes like the BBC report of the "spaghetti farmers," can actually do the opposite of what they intend. Instead of lightening the load in someone's life, it can increase the load. How? By creating cynicism, an attitude that is scornful of the motives and integrity of others.

My father never went to college because his own father was sick, so he and his older brother went to work right after high school to save the family house from foreclosure. One night they were working late and over the radio came a report of Martians invading Grover's Mill, New Jersey! Of course, we all know now it wasn't real, it was basically the practical joke of Orson Welles, based on the novel "The War of the Worlds." But my dad believed it was true and ran home to warn his mother and younger brothers and sister. I won't go into the details, but in the end, my dad was greatly embarrassed and later in life he admitted that it was then that he lost all faith in the news media. That night, he became a cynic.

Fear can have the same effect on a person. It's a very powerful force. The disciples, both the men and the women, were standing eyeball to eyeball with the demonic force of fear. After seeing an angel who told them that Jesus was risen, fear was so real in the women that it says: (Mark 16:8)

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

They did do what the angel told them to do, however, which was to tell the disciples who were hiding in fear, “*mourning and weeping.*” (v. 10) And the disciples’ response to this awesome good news?

When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she (Mary Magdalene) had seen him, they did not believe it. (Mark 16:11)

Two other disciples, who had met the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus, also came and told the disciples that they had seen Him alive, and it says:

...but they did not believe them either. (Mark 16:13)

The disciples were so filled with fear that they wrongly refused to accept the *bona fide*, truthful testimony of men and women of integrity. Men and women they knew!

Now, I’m not saying that fear and cynicism have no benefits. When faced with a pathological liar, cynicism is a very godly response. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was cynical of Hitler’s motives when Hitler was loved by the majority of German citizens. That was a godly response. **So, how do we know when to believe and when to be cynical? When the evidence intersects with a changed life, it’s time to believe!**

Mary Magdalene was formerly a demon-possessed woman. Her life was radically changed by Jesus. The disciples should have believed her, but before we pronounce judgment on them, we need to hear the rest of the story. John says that after the disciples’ first doubtful reaction to Mary’s report, Peter and John did something – they ran to the tomb to examine the evidence for themselves. They saw the empty grave clothes. They saw the empty tomb. And John said:

He saw and believed. (John 20:8)

Why did they now believe? Because the evidence of the empty tomb, combined with the changed life of Mary, gave them no other reasonable choice. Just like Lee Strobel’s investigation of the historical evidence of the Bible, combined with the changed life of his wife, gave him no choice but to believe. But it takes courage to choose to believe the truth when so many are believing a lie. In the end, however, standing with the truth will always bring a reward. Which is the last thing we need to see in this passage.

III. The Reward of Believing

None of the disciples became rich, comfortable or powerful because they believed. So, if that’s your highest priority in life, this isn’t the road to take. But they all did receive, in this life, what Jesus said he wanted them each to have. They were saved from despair and filled with the reality of belonging and of pure joy. Jesus told them at the Last Supper, just before He was crucified:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. (John 15: 9, 11)

Who gets this reward? Mark 16:16 records Jesus’ promise:

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved...

It’s not the water of baptism that saves you, it’s your believing the evidence of truth. Baptism is simply a public demonstration that you believe. Are you ready to believe today? I want to give you the opportunity to do it right now. Let’s pray...

If you have never chosen to become a follower of Jesus Christ before, then simply repeat the words of this prayer silently as I pray it out loud:

Dear Jesus, today I courageously choose to believe./ I believe that you are the only Son of God/ who died on the cross/ to pay the debt of my sin/so that I could be forgiven./I accept you today as my leader./ Thank you for making me part of your family. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer with me just now, then you have become a forever son or daughter of God. This is all because of what Jesus did on this weekend 2,000 years ago. If this is the first time that you've ever prayed a prayer like that, we have a booklet for you to help you understand more about this weekend. If you stop at the Welcome Desk, we have a small packet with information that will really help you.

Now, several friends are going to publicly declare their commitment to Jesus by being baptized.

ⁱ "Strange World," *Campus Life Magazine*, vol. 53, no. 9

ⁱⁱ "Lee Strobel's Testimony: An Atheist Investigates Christianity," Washedred.com