

“The Grand Miracle”

1 Corinthians 15:1-20 ¹

Last Sunday we looked at the very idea of miracles. In our SonRise service this morning, we looked briefly at the miracles recorded in the Bible. In two weeks we'll think about miracles in our own time. But in this moment, our focus is on the Grand Miracle, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This is the “high water mark” of all miraculous events. Every other miracle prepares for this, demonstrates this, or results from this.²

As you and I make our way through life in a terror-infested world, we do well to remember that God's relationship to us and to our planet is not a series of sporadic and disconnected raids such as terrorist organizations conduct, but is rather a strategically coherent and persistent invasion whose end will be complete conquest and the complete renewal of the cosmos. And if it is true, as we affirm, that God really did become human, really died, and really rose from death, then that event “was the central event in the history of the Earth—the very thing that the whole story has been about.”³

This morning, I'd like to think briefly with you about five questions: (1) Was Jesus really the Messiah? (2) Did Jesus really die on the Cross? (3) Was Jesus' tomb really empty? (4) Did Jesus really rise from the dead? (5) So what?

1. Was Jesus really the Messiah? Was Jesus really God's Promised Redeemer whose birth was planned before the foundation of the world (2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 1:20)? The Hebrew Scriptures, which Christians know as the Old Testament, have many, many prophecies about the Messiah. I've catalogued sixty-eight of them, with their fulfillments, and I'll post them with the online version of this sermon. Here are just eight of that sixty-eight:

(1) He will be born of a virgin. (2) He will be born at Bethlehem. (3) He will die by crucifixion. (4) He will be crucified with thieves. (5) His bones will not be broken, but (6) his side will be pierced. (7) He will be buried in a rich man's tomb. (8) He will rise from the dead.

Jesus could not possibly have engineered several of those things, and attempting to engineer the others would have been hugely difficult. Given the extreme improbability of such engineering, what are the chances that those eight things would happen to any one person?⁴ Statistician Peter Stoner examined the matter, concluding that “the chance that any [person] might have lived down to the present time and fulfilled eight prophecies is 1 in 10¹⁷.”

As I'm sure you know, that would be 1 followed by seventeen zeroes. Your chances of winning the Mega-Millions Jackpot are 1 in 258,890,850.

Stoner illustrated this staggering probability: “Suppose we take 10¹⁷ silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, providing they wrote them in their own wisdom.”⁵

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on April 20, 2014, Resurrection Sunday SonRise Service.

² C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 112.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ I'm assuming here that these things did in fact happen to Jesus. For more detailed analysis, see Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

⁵ Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p. 109.

Stoner then went beyond eight prophecies to consider 48, writing that “the chance that any one man fulfilled 48 prophecies [is] 1 in 10^{157} .” This is an unbelievably large number and it represents an extremely small chance . . . which amounts to no chance at all. According to Stoner, a silver dollar is entirely too large for trying to visualize this, so he suggested using an electron, which is one of the smallest objects in the universe.

“An electron,” Stoner wrote, “is so small that it will take 2.5 times 10^{15} of them laid side by side to make a line one inch long. If we were going to count the electrons in this inch, counting 250 a minute, and if we counted day and night without stopping, it would take us 19,000,000 years to count that inch of electrons.” But amazing as that is, it doesn’t begin to address the magnitude of the problem.

As Stoner put it, suppose that we had this great amount of electrons, 10^{157} of them, and we were able to make 500 balls of electrons each minute, with each ball having the diameter of twelve billion light years. Even at 500 such unimaginable balls every minute, it would take 10^{10} times 6,000,000,000 years to use up such a number of electrons.⁶

I have no idea how to check Stoner’s numbers, but if we were to imagine taking such a number of electrons, marking one and stirring it into the whole pile as we did with the silver dollars, then blindfolding a man and letting him try to find the right one, he would obviously have no chance at all of finding it; and Stoner’s calculation has to do with the probability of any one man fulfilling just 48 prophecies, much less the 68 in the table attached with this sermon or the 456 identified by the ancient rabbis!⁷

I think you get the picture. Whether we go with Stoner’s calculations or not, the evidence is extremely strong that Jesus really was the promised Messiah from God.

2. Was Jesus really Dead? Well, okay, even if we grant that Jesus was the Messiah foretold by God, that still doesn’t prove that He rose from the dead. The next question some ask at this point is whether Jesus really died on the Cross at all. They say that Jesus just pretended to die on the Cross, and that’s how He was seen later alive. (Notice that these folks don’t question the fact that Jesus was later seen alive.)

Alexander Metherell, M.D., Ph.D., is one of many who have examined this question. Dr. Metherell concluded, “Jesus was already in hypovolemic shock from the massive blood loss [from the scourging] even before the crucifixion started. He couldn’t possibly have faked his death, because you can’t fake the inability to breath for long. Besides, the spear thrust into his heart would have settled the issue once and for all. [Further, the Roman guards] weren’t about to risk their own deaths by allowing him to [get] away alive.”⁸

Yes, Jesus really did die on the Cross. God arranged for Jesus to die in such a way that there was no possibility—absolutely no possibility—that there could be any legitimate question about whether or not He was really dead.

3. Was Jesus’ Tomb really Empty? This one’s easy. The location of Jesus’ tomb was no secret. The guards were publicly posted. The Jewish leaders certainly knew where it was. The disciples knew where it was. The Jerusalem media—whatever they were—knew where it was.

⁶ Stoner, PDF, p. 52.

⁷ Jewish folk would say, of course, that Jesus didn’t fulfill what they had expected..

⁸ Alexander Metherell, M.D., Ph.D., in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 201.

The Jewish authorities never contested the fact that Jesus' tomb was empty (Matthew 28:11-15). The question always was, "What happened to the body?" You can be sure the Jews looked for it. All they would have had to do was to produce Jesus' dead body, and the whole "Christian thing" would have collapsed. But there was no body. Still, an empty grave does not a resurrection make, and that leads us to the next question

4. Did Jesus really Rise from the Dead? Our text in 1 Corinthians 15 gives us some help here. Paul wrote,

*"I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me—that Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, as the Scriptures said. He was seen by **Peter** and then by the **twelve** apostles. After that, he was seen by more than **five hundred** of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died by now. Then he was seen by **James** and later by **all the apostles**. Last of all, **I saw him, too**"* (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

This confession of faith—that Jesus **died**, was **buried**, was **raised**, and was **seen**—was the essence of Peter's famous Pentecost sermon, and Paul's statement is our earliest written record of this affirmation. So who saw Jesus alive? Paul lists himself, Peter, all twelve apostles (with Matthias in Judas' place; Acts 1:26), Jesus' brother, James, and five hundred others.

Beyond Paul's account, the Gospel records include nine post-resurrection "sightings" of a resurrected Jesus.⁹ Jesus appeared indoors, outdoors, to believers and to skeptics. He materialized and dematerialized at will. He was touchable. He could eat and drink. These appearances continued for several weeks, with an abrupt and definable ending.

Well, that's the eyewitness evidence. But Lee Strobel, former legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, has observed that while eyewitness evidence "is often compelling, it can sometimes be subject to faded memories, prejudices, and even outright fabrication. In contrast, circumstantial evidence is made up of indirect facts from which inferences can be rationally drawn. Its cumulative effect can be every bit as strong—and in many instances even more potent—than eyewitness accounts."¹⁰

Philosopher J.P. Moreland has identified five examples of circumstantial evidence of Jesus' Resurrection that no one disputes.¹¹ Let me mention three of them.

1. Eleven of the Twelve Apostles (all except John) were executed because of their testimony that Jesus was alive and that they had seen Him. People don't choose to die for something they know is a lie.
2. Powerful skeptics were converted after meeting the risen Christ, including Jesus' brother, James, and Saul of Tarsus. When Jesus first began to preach, James thought his brother was insane; and Saul's conversion was rather like the prosecution's chief witness converting over to the defendant's side. Both of them were later killed because of their testimony to a risen Christ.

⁹(1) Mary Magdalene (John 20:10-18); (2) the other women (Matthew 28:8-10); (3) Cleopas and the other disciple (Luke 24:13-32); (4) eleven disciples and others (Luke 24:33-49); (5) ten apostles and others, without Thomas (John 20:19-23); (6) the apostles with Thomas (John 20:26-30); (7) seven apostles by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-14); (8) the disciples again (Matthew 28:16-20); and (9) the apostles and others at Jesus' Ascension (Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:4-9).

¹⁰ Strobel, pp. 244-245.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 246-255.

3. The Jewish people have kept their sense of national identity for more than three thousand years, through horrendous attempts to destroy it, because of their fierce commitment to key components of Judaism. Yet within only five weeks of Jesus' crucifixion, more than ten thousand Jews abandoned both the Law and the Sacrifices given by Moses. They exchanged the Sabbath for the Lord's Day. Absolute monotheism was transformed into the Holy Trinity, and their political Messiah "for Jews only" became the Suffering Servant who redeems the entire world. Why did these Jews so quickly jettison such central cultural tenets? Because they had met the risen Christ.

Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Listen to this statement by Sir Lionel Luckhoo, "the brilliant . . . attorney whose astounding 245 consecutive murder acquittals earned him a place in *The Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's most successful lawyer. . . . [Luckhoo] subjected the historical facts about the Resurrection to his own rigorous analysis for several years before declaring, I say unequivocally that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt."¹²

Was Jesus of Nazareth really the promised Messiah? **YES.**

Did Jesus really die on the Cross? **YES!**

Was his tomb really empty? **YES!!**

Did Jesus really rise from the dead? **YES!!!**

The question that remains for us now is "So What"?

5. "SO WHAT?" Here's the So What:

1. If Jesus really did rise from the dead to live eternally, then He's still alive today and you can know Him personally.
2. If Jesus really did conquer death, then He can open the door of eternal life for you.
3. If Jesus really is the Son of God, the Third Person of the Trinity, then His teachings are more than just good ideas from a wise teacher; they are divine principles on which you can confidently build your life.
4. If Jesus really does set the standard for morality, then you can now have a firm foundation for your choices and decisions, rather than basing them on the shifting sands of expediency, self-centeredness, and popular opinion.
5. If Jesus really has experienced human pain and suffering, then He can comfort, encourage, and strengthen you in the midst of the pain and suffering that He himself warned is inevitable in a world corrupted by sin.
6. If Jesus really did love you enough to die for you, then you have nothing to lose and everything to gain by committing yourself to Him and His purposes.
7. If Jesus really is who He claims to be, then He rightfully deserves your allegiance, your obedience, and your worship.¹³

My friend, if on this Resurrection Morning you believe in your heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, who died for you, was raised from death and is alive forevermore, and if you make

¹² Cited in Ross Clifford, *The Case for the Empty Tomb* (Claremont, CA: Albatross, 1991), p.112, cited in Strobel, p. 255.

¹³ Strobel, p. 267.

the conscious decision to ask Him to forgive all the Sin in your life on the basis of His death in your place, then you will, from this moment forward, be “born again” (John 3:3) and you will begin today to live an Adventure better than anything you have ever imagined.

Lee Strobel was an atheist and a hardened newspaper reporter at *The Chicago Tribune*. But Jesus so changed his life that a few months after he made the decision I’ve just described, his daughter went to his wife and said, “**Mommy, I want God to do for me what He’s done for Daddy.**”¹⁴

That can happen to you, too. And it can happen right now.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 269.