

LIFE CANNOT BE FOUND IN A CEMETERY

SERIES: HE IS ALIVE! AND HE IS STILL ALIVE!

By Ron Ritchie

If you enjoy going to the movies, you probably joined more than a billion other movie buffs around the world to watch the Oscars a few weeks ago. That evening was filled with laughter, joy, beauty, humor, music, dance, creativity, surprises, and tears. It was filled with the joy of living in a world of make-believe for a few hours. But just about the time we were all getting into that make-believe world, we became aware of three disturbing realities. One was that many of the presenters were wearing a red ribbon to remind all of us that the AIDS epidemic is still among us and taking its victims daily. And then in the middle of the presentation there was a slide show of all the great actors and actresses who had died this last year. We knew it was just a matter of time for the older ones, but the death of the younger ones caused us grief because it seemed so untimely. And then in case someone wasn't getting the point death was trying to make, we all knew that up for an Oscar was *Schindler's List*, a three-hour, black-and-white film that reminded us once again of man's inhumanity to man in the murder of millions of innocents.

It is things like these that make most of us realize how deeply we love life and how deeply we hate death. But hating death cannot eliminate its power over us. And so each and every day death threatens not only our own lives but the lives of our lovers, wives, or husbands and our children and grandchildren, not to mention our dear friends, neighbors, and co-workers. When we stand by a graveside to be a silent witness of our love for the deceased, we who are still alive feel an overwhelming powerlessness. We cannot stop the process that will bring about our own physical death and we cannot call out to all those whom we loved lying at our feet and raise them from their graves. The physical death of any loved one should have a way of sobering us to the realities of this life. We stand in shock and grief, brokenhearted, speechless, and helpless. We are tempted to cry out in the silence of the cemetery to anyone willing to listen, "Hey, I didn't ask to be born, and I didn't ask to die. What is going on, anyway?" Most of humanity has these feelings and questions, and unfortunately most are answered only by more silence.

But thank God, we are not all left in the midst of that silence, and that is because of an event that took place in one awesome moment in history some two thousand years ago, in a small cemetery outside the walls of Jerusalem. It was early on a Sunday morning. Some women had left their humble homes to walk together to visit the grave of their beloved friend, the late Jesus.

On the previous Sunday, which we now call Palm Sunday, Jesus had presented himself to the Jewish leadership and the people in Jerusalem as their Messiah and King, the Son of God, and the Prince of Peace. The spiritual leadership of Israel responded by accusing him of the capital offense of blaspheming God. Thursday evening he was arrested, beaten, and mocked. Friday morning the Roman governor Pilate washed his hands of the whole affair and turned him over to the people who wanted him crucified. At noon he was hung on a cross outside the city walls, and at three o'clock he died. *Time* magazine (April 4, 1994, p. 72.) accurately quoted the apostle Paul in answer to the question, Why was Christ crucified? "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us...We are now justified by his blood." His body was taken down from the cross and placed in a borrowed tomb. A large stone was rolled across the door of the cave as the sun began to set in the western sky, and the hopes and dreams of his disciples, both men and women, began to be drowned in grief.

The women sat at home on the Sabbath grieving over what appeared to be Jesus' unjust and untimely death. Then early the next morning they went to the graveyard to anoint his bruised, wounded, and now cold body with oil. But their visit to the cemetery that Sunday would finally challenge the threat and the power of death that had enslaved them all their lives!

There is no life in an empty tomb

Matthew 28:1

Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.

That new day began with sorrow, pain, and confusion, but it would be filled with joy and hope, not only for them but for all who finally believe that there is no life in an empty tomb. The gospel of Luke tells us that the women came to the tomb bringing spices they had prepared. According to a harmony of the gospels (Luke 24; Mark 16; and John 20), one of the women was Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus had cast out seven demons. After Jesus' resurrection she would be the first one to see and touch him (see John 20:14-18). Among them were also Mary the mother of James the less, who was one of the apostles; Salome; and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward. And there were several other women who had contributed to the financial support of Jesus and his disciples.

In spite of all that the prophets had told of the Messiah's life, death, and resurrection, and all the times Jesus had told his disciples and these women about his death and resurrection, they did not understand it. As they proceeded toward the cemetery, their hearts filled with grief and their hands filled with perfumes to anoint the severely wounded body of their dead Messiah, the truth of Jesus' resurrection was greatly clouded by a single concern: "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" (See Mark 16:3.) And what they were really wondering was, "Now that Jesus has died and is buried, who will take away our fear of death? Who will take away our fear of God? Who will take away our fear of judgment? Who will take away our grief? Who will take away our suffering? Who will take away our sins? Who will take away our shame? Who will take away our fear of living? Who will take away our addictions? Who will take away our anxieties? Who will take away our burdens?...."

Like these women, we have all heard what Jesus was willing to do for us as our Lord and Savior---but until our hearing turns into belief and we step out in that belief, we will remain in our sorrow, pain, and grief, and we will find ourselves walking toward some local graveyard to perform a meaningless custom: anointing a dead body.

I talked to a single man last week who has decided to stop walking into cemeteries looking for life. That is, he has decided to stop walking into situations that lead only to spiritual and emotional death, and he has returned to his relationship with Jesus. And I talked to a single mother this week who also said that she is weary of walking into the cemeteries of this society looking for life and now wants to turn to the risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for a new life.

There is life only in the risen Lord Jesus

Matthew 28:2-8

And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his garment as white as snow; and the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. And the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going before you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you." And they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples.

Sometime during the night there was an earthquake, for an angel rolled away the stone and sat on it. There had also been an earthquake in Jerusalem on Friday at three o'clock when the Lord gave up his spirit and called out to his Father, "It is finished." Matthew records in 27:51-54, "And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook; and the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened; and many

bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

You probably remember that when Jesus was born angels appeared to some shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem and said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11.) And now two angels were bringing good news about his resurrection. One angel's appearance was like lightning, and his garment as white as snow. The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men. This angel was joined by another (see Luke 24:4) whose presence and majestic appearance terrified the women and also caused the guards who were placed in front of the tomb to become like dead men.

Who were these guards and why were they guarding a dead man named Jesus? The chief priests and the Pharisees had gone to Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.' Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, lest the disciples come and steal him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first." So the Jewish leadership went out to the tomb where Jesus was laid, set a seal on the stone, and posted their own guards there. (See Matthew 27:62-66.)

One of the angels said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified." Luke tells us that the angel asked the women, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Or why do you seek the Resurrection and the Life in a graveyard? Cemeteries are designed for dead people. It is true that by Jewish custom you women normally come and anoint the bodies of your loved ones a few times before death really settles in on the body; and then finally you seal the tomb and accept the reality that your beloved is gone from this earth. But Jesus, your beloved Lord and Savior, is no longer dead!" Martha had told Jesus at the time of the death of her brother Lazarus that she believed in the resurrection on the last day. Believing in the resurrection was not difficult for the Jews. But hearing Jesus say, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25-26), and then believing Jesus when he said he would be raised on the third day after his physical death--now that was a whole new challenge!

Millions of people every year take time out of their lives to go and visit Graceland and the grave of Elvis Presley. Others go down to Forest Lawn and lay some flowers at the grave of Marilyn Monroe. Still others stand in silence at Arlington Cemetery and watch the eternal flame burning on top of the grave of Jack Kennedy. Among the many visitors, thousands deeply wish with all their hearts that these three people would return to life on this earth and continue to entertain or lead us. But deep down inside they also know that there is no power in the wishing, and so these graves will remain closed until the final resurrection.

But at the empty tomb of Jesus the angel said, "He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying." Dr. Luke recorded these words of Jesus to his disciples: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again." (Luke 18:31-34.) Then Luke recorded the words of the angels to the women: "Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." (Luke 24:6-8.) And they remembered.

On our recent vacation to Jerusalem I read once again the simple but wonderful message carved on the swinging door of the empty Garden Tomb outside the walls of Jerusalem: "He is not here, for He has risen." It refers to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. And it is because of this wonderful resurrection from the grave that all of us who place our faith in him as our risen Savior have discovered that our search for life is over, and we begin the lifetime quest of growing in our relationship with God and his risen Son Jesus.

An immediate bonus for our souls is the elimination of the fear of death as spoken of the words of the apostle

Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:55-56:

"Death has been swallowed up in victory.'
'Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?'

The sting of death is sin...But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." The apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...." (1 Peter 1:3.) Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, all who place their faith in him as Lord and Savior shall also be raised from the dead. That is our living hope.

On that final Passover, the Lamb of God was placed on the cross to take away the sins of the world. God's plan of redemption would be available to anyone who was willing to place their faith in his Son for their salvation. And he died so that we could live forever. At the time the disciples did not understand what he had been saying, for it was hidden from them. But none of God's promises would be valid without the bodily resurrection of his Son from the grave. Paul would later write to the Corinthian believers some twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...." (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). He then went on to say that if Christ had not been raised from the dead, the gospel was preached in vain, their faith was in vain, there was no hope beyond the grave, and all humanity would perish, for we would all remain in our sins; and we of all men were most to be pitied. But as Peter said on the day of Pentecost, "And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power." (Acts 2:24.)

"Come, see the place where He was lying." The angel had rolled away the stone in front of the tomb---not so that Jesus could walk out of the grave, but rather so that the women could look in and give witness that he had already risen. He had left the tomb sometime earlier that morning. And so the angels told them to "...go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going before you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you." So they left the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to tell the disciples. Based on this experience alone---the two angels in lightning-like robes, the empty tomb, and the reminder that Jesus had told all his disciples that he would be raised from the dead---these women, not having seen him themselves, took off in faith, their despair and grief now turned to hope and joy. "He is alive! He is alive! Jesus is alive!" We know from Luke's gospel that the women told the disciples, who had a hard time believing them. We also know that Peter and John ran to the empty tomb to check it out for themselves, for they were still having problems understanding his resurrection. But they went back to their homes in preparation for their trip to Galilee.

Because Jesus is alive, we can have life

Matthew 28:9-10

And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they shall see Me."

At this point, apparently Mary Magdalene, still confused and grieved, went back to the empty tomb after Peter and John left. Then Jesus appeared to her. "Mary!" he said. And she responded, "Teacher!" He told her to tell the disciples, "I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God." And now her faith in Jesus as her Lord and Savior was fully confirmed. Then the women except for Mary Magdalene were together after they had told the disciples about the events in the cemetery, and suddenly their belief in an invisible reality for the first time became a visible reality: Jesus, in his new resurrection body, which Peter, James and John had seen on the mount of Transfiguration and which Mary Magdalene had seen in the garden, was now standing before them alive! and beautiful! And he greeted them with words of comfort. Their only natural response was to fall to their knees, take hold of his feet, and with hearts overflowing with wonderment and joy, worship him. "He is alive! The tomb is empty, the angels were right, he is alive! We are here together, we

are touching him, he is speaking to us, we are speaking to him! He is not a ghost, he is not an angel, he is not a gardener---he is Jesus, crucified, buried, and now risen. He is alive!"

Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee and there they shall see Me." We know now that after Jesus rose from the dead, he continued to appear to his disciples on this earth over a period of some forty days. Then he ascended into heaven, but not without the promise that he would be invisibly, and sometimes even visibly, present with them and all his disciples until the end of the age. The apostle Paul told us, "[Jesus] appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time...then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also." (1 Corinthians 15:5-8.)

The philosophies of this world would like us all to believe that every day should be like a make-believe Oscar night. The promoters of this world would like us all to look beautiful, wear fine clothes, drive fine cars, laugh, party, be creative, and have fun rewarding ourselves at all times. Even the red ribbons, slide shows of the departed, and black-and-white movies showing the death of millions may be part of the make-believe world. For the reality of death and cemeteries can be covered with the dignity of Arlington, the beauty of Forest Lawn, or the fun of Graceland. Yet we are still left with the haunting feeling that there is really no life in a cemetery. We all know cemeteries are designed to hold the dead among us, and when we stand at the burial site of a loved one we find ourselves finally forced to think about our own impending physical death and wonder where we will spend eternity.

But the good news for all who are willing to listen is this: Jesus Christ willingly went to the cross for our sins, for our rebellion against God and his laws. And then God the Father raised him from the grave, demonstrating that he was indeed the Son of God. It is through these two acts of love that Jesus has now become the only one who can forgive us of our sins, eliminate our fear of death, and give us the gift of eternal life.

Eternal life is all wrapped up in the words of the angels to the women who came to visit Jesus' tomb: "He is not here, for he has risen." Listen to these words from the apostle Paul if you desire to receive this wonderful gift of eternal life from our risen Lord Jesus: "...If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved...for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" (Romans 10:9-13.)

Catalog No. 4363
Matthew 28:1-10
Third Message
Ron Ritchie
April 3, 1994

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.