

"HEAR YE HIM"

A Devotional Series For Radio

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Easter Program 275

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The Sermon: I AM HE THAT LIVETH

Scripture: I Corinthians 15:19-22.

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

I am he that liveth and was dead; behold, I am alive for evermore.

The most important single fact of Christianity is that he once was dead, but now lives, and is alive for evermore. It is the fact of the resurrection which proves that Jesus was what he claimed to be -- the Son of God. If he was the Son of God, he was able to save mankind, and we may hope to be made alive in him. If he was not the Son of God, and if he died like a criminal on a cruel and shameful cross, never to live again, then the extinction of such unparalleled beauty and nobility of character serves only to make death seem more cruel, and life more senseless and miserably unbearable. "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable."

How can we know that he is risen? Is the Easter story only a myth concocted to fulfill mankind's instinctive but unreasonable desires for immortality? Is the story of the empty tomb only a cruel hoax, or a pious fraud perpetrated by Jesus' disciples? On this Easter morning when Nature herself is filled with bursting new life, when church bells, choirs, and joyful congregations proclaim that he is risen, let us take a brief look at this basic Christian affirmation to see whether it is reasonable and in keeping with the historical facts.

First we should note that Jesus himself on several occasions foretold his own death and resurrection. In Caesarea Philippi Jesus had taught his disciples that he must suffer many things, be killed, and after three days rise again. On another occasion while disputing with the Jews in Jerusalem Jesus said: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," meaning the temple of his body. After the Mount of Transfiguration experience the disciples were told to

tell no man what they had seen, till the Son of man was risen from the dead. As he turned towards Jerusalem for the last time he told his disciples that he must "go to Jerusalem, and be killed, and be raised again the third day." On the Mount of Olives, just before his betrayal, Jesus said that his flock would be scattered when he himself was destroyed, but "after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee." When the priests begged Pilate for a guard on the tomb, they gave as their reason: "This deceiver said while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again."

His disciples therefore should have been looking for and expecting his resurrection; but they were not. It came as an incredible surprise to them. When they realized what had happened, it changed them almost overnight from a group of frustrated, beaten, hopeless, disillusioned men into men of fearless boldness and staunch resolution. And the burden of their evangel? "He is risen!" With that simple statement of fact they overcame all argument and confounded their enemies. It is very strange indeed that in all the record of the four gospels and the book of Acts, there is no account of any attempt to muster evidence or witnesses to disprove the fact of the resurrection. There is ridicule, there is skepticism, there is persecution of believers, but never any attempt at proof.

Several more or less ingenious explanations for the so-called resurrection myth have been proposed by skeptics and scoffers. The priests said that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body while the guards slept. If the guards were asleep, how could they know what happened? If they were asleep on guard, why were they

not punished? If the disciples stole the body, what did they hope to do with it? There could be no possible use for a dead Messiah. A dead Savior could not have wrought the change that took place in the disciples. A dead Savior could not have attracted thousands of converts and shaken the Roman Empire with his gospel. A dead Savior could not have changed James, the Lord's brother, from a skeptic who thought Jesus to be mentally unbalanced, to James the Just, the acknowledged head of the mother church in Jerusalem. And no great moral structure such as the early Christian church could have been reared on the foundation of a lie.

Another theory is that Joseph of Arimathea secretly removed Jesus' body, to a more suitable place. If Joseph was acting from a sense of duty to the Sanhedrin of which he was a member, then he should have been able to produce the body for them when they questioned the factuality of the resurrection. If he was Jesus' friend, then it is reasonable to suppose that he would have made a sacred shrine of the last resting place of that body, wherever it was. Neither of these things happened.

Another theory is that the Romans removed the body. Pilate was the representative of Rome. His stubbornness in refusing to alter the sign posted on the cross is well known. He mixed as little as possible in the religious and political squabbles of the Jews. He specifically declined to set a guard of Roman soldiers over the tomb, but gave the priests authority to do that themselves. It is not likely that he would bother the remains of a dead criminal.

Then perhaps the Jews removed the body? If so, why did they not produce it to prove the resurrection story a hoax? Or perhaps, say some other skeptics, the women who came early on the first day of the week mistakenly came to the wrong tomb, met the gardener who tried to tell them "He is not here-- he is over there." But they misunderstood, and ran back to the city to spread the story of the resurrection. Why then didn't someone produce the gardener and the body lying

peacefully in the right tomb?

One of the most ingenious theories of those who do not believe in the resurrection is the "swoon theory," that Jesus merely fainted from loss of blood, revived in the coolness of the tomb, and subsequently reappeared to his disciples. Just how likely is it that a man who had been beaten with the terrible flagellum, or Roman scourge, who had been deprived of food and water since early the preceding evening, who had fainted, too weak to carry his own cross, who had bled from five serious wounds, had been certified dead by a Roman centurion -- how likely is it that such a man would be hailed as a risen Lord, even if he had succeeded in getting out of his tomb? Then consider that in order to get out he would have had to unwrap himself from the winding grave clothes which bound him tightly hand and foot like a mummy, and then roll a very large circular flat disc of a stone uphill in a sloping slot in the rock. Does this make the swoon theory sound plausible?

The Scriptures record at least twelve appearances of Jesus after his resurrection: (1) To the other Mary, Salome, Joanna, and certain other women, (2) to Mary Magdalene, (3) to Peter, (4) to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, (5) to the apostles on the eve of his resurrection, Thomas being absent, (6) to the apostles, including Thomas (7) to a group of disciples, including at least four apostles on the shores of Galilee, (8) to the apostles and five hundred brethren at once, (9) to James, (10) to the apostles at Jerusalem just before his ascension, and (11) to Saul on the road to Damascus and (12) to John on the Isle of Patmos. Were all these people fooled?

"I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys to hell and of death." Jesus lives. This is both the assurance and the hope today of millions of Christians who have felt his life living in them, and who have been made to know by his Spirit that because he lives, we too shall live.