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### Sermon Summary #53

#### **“I’ve Staked my Life on an Empty Tomb” Mark 16:1-8**

While a student at Wheaton College, Jim Elliot struggled and prayed over what God would have him do with his life. His passionate and self-sacrificial search for God’s will eventually brought him and four of his friends to the rain forest of Ecuador, on a white strip of sand next to the Curaray River. It was there that Jim and his companions were preparing to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Auca Indians, a violent tribe that until now had absolutely no contact with the outside world.

For several days in advance of their mission, Jim and his friends had flown over the jungle in their small plane, dropping gifts to the Aucas: cooking utensils, tools, cloth, and copies of a gospel tract. Finally, on January 6, 1956, signs of hope appeared. Without warning 3 Auca Indians stepped out of the jungle and accepted Jim’s hand. He led them across the river to meet the other 4 missionaries. There were 2 Auca women and 1 man, whom they called “George.”

The next day, Saturday, was anti-climactic. Nothing happened. There was no sign of the 3 Aucas or anyone else, although Jim recorded in his diary that he felt someone was always watching them from the jungle. He would often shout phrases of the Auca language, declaring his good intentions and desire to help them, but with no response.

On Sunday afternoon, following a dinner of baked beans and carrot sticks, Nate Saint, the pilot of their small plane, radioed that he could see a group of Aucas approaching the camp. He landed the plane and the 5 excited missionaries began to sing this hymn:

“We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender,  
We go not forth alone against the foe.  
Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,  
We rest on Thee, and in Thy name we go.

Yea, in Thy name, O Captain of Salvation,  
In Thy blest name, all other names above,  
Jesus our Righteousness, our sure Foundation,  
Our Prince of Glory, and our King of Love.

We go in faith, our own great weakness feeling,  
And needing more each day Thy grace to know,  
Yet from our hearts a song of triumph pealing,  
We rest on Thee, and in Thy name we go.

We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender,  
Thine is the battle, Thine shall be the praise,  
When passing through the gates of pearly splendor,  
Victors, we rest with Thee through endless days.”

Listen to that last line again: “When passing through the gates of pearly splendor, Victors, we rest with Thee through endless days.”

Within minutes that is exactly what Jim Elliot and his 4 friends would do. By 4:30 that afternoon all five missionaries were dead: viciously murdered in an ambush, their bodies pierced repeatedly by primitive spears at the hands of those Auca Indians for whom they had prayed for six years and for whom they had sacrificed all comfort and career opportunities to win them to Christ.

One remarkable irony is that wrapped around one of the spears taken from the body of one of the missionaries was a gospel tract, one of many they had dropped from the plane.

They left behind five widows and nine fatherless children. To the world at large, this seems like little more than a sad and tragic waste of five young lives. But the world at large did not understand what Jim Elliot understood when he wrote the words: ***“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.”***

Now here’s the point I want to make from this story. If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, the world was right: this was a sad and tragic waste of five young lives. Jim and his friends went to their deaths singing these words: “When passing through the gates of pearly splendor, Victors, we rest with Thee through endless days.” But if Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, neither Jim nor anyone else will ever pass through the gates of pearly splendor. If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, Jim was not a “Victor” but a defeated fool.

Jim Elliot is famous for the words: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.” But if Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, there is nothing to “gain”. And if there is nothing to gain, he is in fact a colossal fool who gives up all.

Of course, the story doesn’t end with the death of Jim Elliot and his four friends. Their courageous sacrifice resulted in the gospel penetrating the darkness of the Auca Indians, most of whom eventually came to saving faith in Christ, including the man who himself killed Jim Elliot.

But if Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, it was all for nothing.

So, was Jim Elliot a “fool” for giving up what he believed he could not keep, in order to gain what he believed he could not lose? I don’t think so.

Which brings us to Mark 16 and the account of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We spent three weeks examining his death by crucifixion and last week we looked at his burial. Today I want to combine the accounts of his resurrection found in all four gospels.

There has been a lot of controversy over the differences between Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and their respective descriptions of what happened on Easter Sunday morning. But ***the differences are not discrepancies***. In other words, all four accounts, in my opinion, are complementary and perfectly compatible with one another. The way to see this is for me simply to tell you the story of what happened, in twelve stages, one step at a time.

(1) The first thing of importance for us to note is the commitment of several women who had witnessed the crucifixion and had helped in his burial. They agreed to return on Sunday morning, after the Sabbath, to finish preparation of Jesus’ body. Two women in particular, Joanna and Susanna, already had in their possession the spices needed to anoint Jesus (Luke 23:55-24:1). Early on Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Salome went to the market to

purchase additional spices with which to anoint and prepare Jesus' body. These spices were used to offset odors that resulted from decomposition.

The fact that they agreed to return to the tomb on Sunday indicates that they had no expectations of an immediate resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

(2) Before the women arrived at the tomb, there was a great earthquake. Matthew tells us that it was caused by an angel who descended from heaven and rolled back the stone (Mt. 28:2). The guards who were stationed at the tomb obviously witnessed this (how could they possibly have missed it?). But they did not see the risen Lord Jesus. As we'll note in a moment, the first person to see Jesus alive was Mary Magdalene. Matthew says that after the angel moved the stone he sat upon it, both to frighten away the soldiers and to make it clear that no one could replace it.

The soldiers were terrified at the appearance of the angel. We read in Matthew 28:3-4 that his "appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men."

Let's not forget that these were soldiers of considerable experience in the field of battle, having likely served in times of war in Greece, Egypt, and Syria. The worst they expected was to battle a rag-tag band of fishermen and farmers. They had never bargained for an angelic visitation! Their swords were of no use against this supernatural being. They fell into something of a catatonic state, but eventually recovered and ran away to report what had happened.

After the soldiers left in fear, the angel went inside the tomb, presumably in order not to frighten the women upon their arrival (Mt. 28:5).

(3) The stone was moved away not to let Jesus out but to let the women and the other witnesses in. This brings up the subject of *the nature of Jesus' resurrection body*.

- He could pass through a sealed tomb
- He could pass through closed doors (John 20:19,26).
- He was capable of being seen and touched and even ate food with his disciples (Luke 24:38-43). Jesus didn't eat because he needed nourishment. He ate with them to enjoy their fellowship and most of all to demonstrate that he was real and not some phantom or ghost. He wanted to put their fears to rest.
- His was a spiritual body, not because it wasn't also physical, but in the sense that it was dominated and energized by the Spirit and gloriously adapted to life in a spiritual realm. He lived in time and space but was not hindered or restricted or in any way limited by it.

(4) Precisely *when* did Jesus rise from the dead? This will probably come as a shock to many of you, but he could conceivably have been raised anytime after sunset on Saturday night. Remember that the Jews reckoned their days from sunset to sunset. Therefore, what you and I would typically regard as Saturday night was for them Sunday.

How then can it be said that Jesus was in the grave for three days and three nights? Uninformed critics typically jump on this as a colossal mistake in the gospels. But according to Jewish reckoning, when it came to determining time, **any part of a day was considered by them to be the whole day**. In other words, although Jesus was in the grave only one or two hours on Friday, the Jews counted it as a whole day and night, 24 hours. Thus, Jesus could conceivably have been

buried only 26 hours: one hour on Friday, twenty-four hours on Saturday (the Sabbath), and one hour on Sunday. And yet it could truly be said of him that he was in the grave “three days and three nights. In sum, then, three days and nights need mean only the combination of any part of three separate days.

(5) Matthew tells us that the soldiers went directly to the chief priests and reported everything. The religious leaders in turn paid them a large sum of money to tell everyone that the disciples had come and stolen the body. Some find this implausible. After all, would these soldiers have admitted falling asleep on the job, knowing that it was an offense punishable by death?

However, they were convinced the Sanhedrin would act as a buffer between them and Pilate (Mt. 28:14). They were promised by the Jewish leaders that they would be kept out of trouble. Furthermore, they had already committed an offense worthy of death by leaving their post at the tomb! I can also imagine that their fear of the supernatural visitation by this angel was greater than their fear of Pilate. Finally, these men were desperate to explain the absence of the body and this was the best explanation short of admitting that a resurrection had taken place.

(6) Let’s pause for a moment and think about these soldiers. A “guard” usually consisted of 4 men who rotated shifts. During the night there would be four shifts of two to three hours each.

So what happened to the four who would have been present when the angel appeared? What was their reaction? I can’t help but wonder if they talked about it among themselves? What explanation did they give for what they saw? Did they like awake at night, terrified on their beds, trying to make sense of the experience? They had no doubt heard of “angels” from the Jewish people over whom they ruled. Were they bothered by the religious leaders paying money to cover up the truth? After all, these guards knew the body hadn’t been stolen. They knew something supernatural had occurred! What explanation did they give their families?

“Hi honey! How did your watch go? Boring as usual I’m sure. Be quiet, though, the kids are sound asleep. Honey, you look a little shook up. Are you OK? You didn’t lose your job did you?”

“Uh, no, in fact I got a bonus tonight. Uh, you’ll never believe this, but we were standing our guard when this huge white angel, as bright as a bolt of lightning, suddenly appeared and moved the stone from in front of that tomb; you know, the stone that it took several of us to put in place. Well, you see, this big angel showed up and caused this massive earthquake, and well, . . .”

“Honey, sit down and relax. Let me get you something to drink. You obviously need it. And then I’m going to call the doctor to give you a thorough examination. Did you get hit on the head with something?”

The bottom line is this: Would these men have continued to live a lie or would they bow before the risen Lord of heaven and earth? What did they do later on when they heard the disciples preaching that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead? I don’t know, but when I get to heaven I wouldn’t be surprised if I run into a couple of them!

(7) But what about the possibility that the disciples stole the body? Consider these factors:

- They were terrified out of their minds following the events in Gethsemane.

- They had never understood our Lord's prediction of his resurrection while he was alive. Are we now asked to believe that in their distraught, demented condition that they all of a sudden figure it out and hatch a plot to steal the body and thus pretend that it had come true?
- Are we to believe that they would then be willing to suffer horrific persecution, imprisonment and martyrdom for something they knew was a complete fabrication?
- They had fled to Bethany after Gethsemane. Being pious Jews they would not have defiled themselves and the Sabbath by traveling to Jerusalem and robbing a grave!
- There is no evidence of such dishonesty and deceit on their part that would have led them to theft. The only dishonest one among them was Judas, and he was already dead.
- Even if they had decided to steal the body, they could hardly have overpowered armed soldiers.
- Molesting graves was itself a capital crime, punishable by death. Would these timid and fearful disciples have mustered sufficient courage to rob the grave of Jesus? And if they had, why didn't the Jewish authorities prosecute them for it?

(8) About this time, Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Salome were making their way to the tomb, talking along the way about how they were going to remove the stone. They probably reassured themselves with the recollection that Joseph of Arimathea had a gardener or possibly a night watchman. When they arrived, they were astonished to see the tomb opened and no guards present. Mary Magdalene immediately jumped to the conclusion that someone had stolen the body and she ran off to tell Peter and John.

About this time Joanna and Susanna arrived, as they had agreed on the previous Friday, to join them to anoint the body of Jesus. The four women then boldly entered the tomb and stood off to the left, looking to the right where the body of Jesus had been laid, waiting anxiously for their eyes to adjust to the light.

What they saw is reported differently by the gospel records. Matthew says they saw one angel. Mark says they saw one young man. Luke says they saw two men in dazzling apparel. Is there a contradiction here? No. In the first place, angels are almost always depicted in Scripture as men. Thus it was an angel in the form of a man that they saw.

But how many were there? Remember this: *if there were two then there was one*. It would be a contradiction only if the writer had said there was **only** one. But he doesn't. We often encounter two or more people but later only mention the one with whom we actually conversed. Perhaps an illustration will help . . .

Also, we are dealing with two descriptions of an event and not with two witnesses in a court of law replying to cross examination. If we were in a courtroom and an attorney asked the witnesses, "**Precisely how many** men were present?" and the first said, "There was only one," and the other said, "I saw two," then we would have a contradiction. But the gospel writers are not answering the question "How many?", but are giving incomplete descriptions of a complex event.

The words spoken to them are designed to remove their fears and to reassure them that the body of Jesus had not been stolen. Read Mark 16:6-7 . . .

(9) The fact that these four women were the first to receive the announcement that Jesus had risen is significant in that Jewish law declared the testimony of women to be worthless. They were not eligible to serve as legal witnesses. This again points to the integrity of the gospel accounts, for

the early church would never have invented a story about the resurrection that they knew depended on the testimony of people whom society at large utterly discounted.

(10) Remember that Mary Magdalene had most likely run back to tell Peter and John of the removal of the stone before the other women had entered the tomb. She did not as yet know that Jesus had been raised. She was actually quite despondent over the prospect that his body had been stolen. She tells Peter what happened and he and John run to the tomb, leaving her behind. They arrive after the four women had already departed and returned to the city by another route.

John reaches the tomb first, but hesitates. Peter, not known for hesitation, enters first. Both of them bear witness to the empty tomb and see the burial cloths lying to the side, with the cloth that would have been wrapped around his head to hold his jaw shut rolled up and set to the side.

(11) In the meantime, Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb alone. Listen to the account of what happens next, as told by John in **John 20:14-18**. Two things to note:

What must she have felt and experienced in hearing Jesus speak her name: “Mary!”

Mary clings to him, fearful that he will otherwise forever depart. Evidently she tries to hold him down, thinking that he has already ascended into heaven and will immediately return there, never to be seen again. Jesus does not forbid her to touch him but gives gentle reassurance that she need not fear to leave him and tell the good news to others, for his ascension to the Father is still in the future.

(12) Several appearances of Jesus then ensue. The other women, either on their way back to Jerusalem or on their way to Bethany to tell the disciples, are met by Jesus on the road. Their response is one of wonder and joyful worship (Mt. 28:9-10). Jesus also appears to two disciples on the Emmaus road (Luke 24).

It is likely at this point that Jesus appears personally and privately to Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5). We don't know where this meeting took place, but Gethsemane is likely. What we do know is the purpose of the meeting. See Mark 16:7!

So, why is all this important? What ultimate difference does it make? **1 Corinthians 15:12-19!!!**

Was Jim Elliot a fool after all? Was it a silly, selfish, and immature waste of his life that he should have staked everything on an empty tomb? Are we all fools for doing the same thing? The answer is Yes only if the tomb was not, in fact, empty. If the body of Jesus is still there, if he never actually rose from the dead as Scripture says he did, then we are indeed fools and as Paul says “of all men most to be pitied.”

But if Jesus did rise from the dead, if the tomb is truly empty and he is alive and ruling the universe as Scripture tells us he is, then Jim Elliot was right: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.”