

“Easter Dragnet”

April 4, 2010

Rev. Thom Larson

In the most recent issue of *Newsweek* magazine, Lisa Miller confesses her struggle with believing in a bodily resurrection. She claims that she's not the only American who is having difficulty embracing this central belief of the Christian faith. While polls show that about 80 percent of us believe in heaven, only 26 percent of us think that we'll actually have bodies there. And the number of Americans who say they believe that Jesus rose from the dead to eat barbecued fish with his disciples and to walk through locked doors has dropped 10 percentage points in the last seven years to 70%, simply because the idea is so difficult to imagine and impossible to explain.

Based on the physical evidence that is given in the scriptures, the empty tomb, the missing body, the discarded burial clothes, there's just not enough hard, factual proof to establish the truth of Jesus' bodily resurrection in some peoples' minds. And without the facts, Miller just can't let herself believe. In her zealous quest for just the facts, she reminds me of Sergeant Joe Friday from the old television series, *Dragnet*, who was always working to solve the criminal cases in the city of Los Angeles by gathering

together the physical evidence at hand, and by interviewing any witness to the crime by asking for, *“Just the facts, ma’am. Give me the facts.”*

Sometimes you need more than just the facts to establish the truth. Did you know that there are quite a few people who refuse to believe that American astronauts walked on the moon? They believe that the whole lunar landing was staged on a Hollywood television set. The whole thing, including the moon walk, was a hoax pulled off by NASA to generate more financial support from the American people for the space program. What do you think Buzz Aldrin would likely say to a person who doubted his walk on the moon. Maybe something like this: *“You can believe whatever you want. Whatever you happen to believe about the moon landing makes no difference to me. It makes no difference as to the facts. I was there!”* Did you know that there are quite a few people who don’t believe in the Holocaust. And not all of the people who refuse to believe are militant Islamists. They write a revision of history that claims the Germans never mistreated the Jews in World War II. They say the statistics are wrong and that the photographs have been doctored, and that the deaths of over six million people by the Nazis never happened. What do you think a Jewish woman with a number tattooed on her arm would say to a person

who doubted her imprisonment and questioned her suffering. Maybe something like this: *“Whatever you may believe about the Holocaust makes no difference to me. Your opinion makes no difference as to the facts. And I was there!”* Did you know that there are still people living in the world today who believe that the world is flat? They even have a website at www.flat-earth.org. You can go there to learn about their non-denominational, non-profit organization that’s dedicated to overcoming the politically correct view that the earth is spherical. They claim that the earth is actually flat with five sides, and that every place on earth named “Springfield” has a mystical connection to a higher order of reality. What would you say to a person who was insistent with you that the world was flat? I’m sure I would say something like this: *You can believe the earth is flat if you want to. Whatever you believe about the shape of the world makes no difference as to the facts. But I live here on the earth. And the only explanation for the things that I have experienced argues for a world that is round. I know what I’ve experienced so don’t take me for a fool.”*

The challenge in believing in Jesus’ resurrection isn’t anything new. It began on the first Easter morning. When word reached the authorities that Jesus’ tomb was empty, their response was to say that

Jesus' disciples had taken the body away. Some may have argued that the disciples were confused in their grief and had gone to the wrong tomb. Perhaps even some of the more philosophical among them might have said, "In their grief, they simply wish him alive and are reliving significant memories of other events they shared with him." Even some of the disciples, like Thomas, found it impossible to believe the testimony of the other disciples that they had not only seen Jesus, but that they had spoken with him, and eaten with him, and that he was alive. It's impossible to prove Jesus' bodily resurrection based on the evidence of the day, but the scriptures provide us with the testimony that Peter gave to those who questioned the truth of Jesus' resurrection. Here's how Peter responded when giving his testimony regarding the events of Jesus' resurrection: "*We are witnesses to all that Jesus did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.*" In other words, "Whatever you may believe about the Resurrection makes no difference to me. It makes no difference as to the facts. I was there. I know what happened!"

We may not know what happened to Jesus' body that first Easter. We may not be able to prove his resurrection. There may not be enough hard facts to convince other people beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus rose from the grave. But we do know what happened to the disciples. Their experience on that first Easter morning changed them from a fearful, cautious, uncertain group of former friends of Jesus, into bold proclaimers that God had raised Jesus from the dead, that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah of Jewish expectation and the son of God who brought victory over death, who offered forgiveness for sin, and who reigned with God on high. They proclaimed their faith in the courtyards of the temple. They declared Jesus' resurrection and victory over death before kings and emperors. They left their homes in Galilee and Palestine and traveled to the far corners of the earth to tell about their faith in Christ. They even sacrificed their lives so that the good news of Jesus' resurrection could be spread throughout the world. They were transformed from disciples of Jesus into apostles of Christ as they witnessed to their experience of Jesus' resurrection. *“As to the facts of the resurrection, we don't care. You can believe what you want. But we were there!”*

Whether or not you believe in the resurrection makes no difference! It makes no difference

concerning the facts, but it makes all the difference concerning your fate. Your belief cannot alter the facts, but it can alter your fate.

The fear of death haunts everybody. Death becomes especially terrifying if our only choice is to believe that when we've breathed our last that will be the end of it. We will return to dust. The winds will blow over our graves and we will be forgotten. If that's our only option, life becomes rather aimless. What you do and how you live doesn't really matter anymore. It all comes to nothing when you breathe your last.

Some people say: "Life's a burden and then you die." Well, usually they use another "b" word that's much more crude than that, but you get the message. Is that all there is to life? Without hope beyond the grave, then that's all there is to life.

But if we believe that Jesus has conquered death through the power of God, and that his victory over death is something that he shares with us through our faith and love for him ... then all of life and eternity becomes meaningful. We can really have hope.

During the Civil War, a Confederate unit was severely mauled by a superior Yankee force, and they

fell into hasty retreat toward a distant sanctuary that could be well defended. It appeared, however, because of the flanking attacks by the Yankees that they would never reach their destination. Finally, however, the word came back along the ranks of the dispirited men that the head of the column had arrived. What an amazing transformation took place in those soldiers. They had been discouraged and despondent. They walked with no spirit in their step. But when word came that the head of the column had reached safety, they discovered they had reason to hope again. They were not yet out of danger, but since the head of the column had made it through the battle to a place of security, maybe, just maybe, they would get there, too.

The good news of Easter is that in Christ, the head of our column has arrived. Our greatest fear has been dispelled. Our lives are secure in Jesus' keeping. And we have reason to hope.

Our belief in the resurrection makes a difference in the quality of our life right now as well, not just in our experiences of physical death.

There was a young woman in the church in Idaho Falls whose father died when I was pastor there. Her father had lived in California, and Kim had to travel

to his hometown to gather with family for his memorial services. Before she left with her husband and young son, she came into my office and shared with me how difficult this trip would be. She had been very close to her father. He has been a tower of strength for her when she had gone through some tough times in her life. She had a very difficult relationship with her mother and siblings and was very much afraid of the hurtful and cruel things that might be said, especially since her father was no longer there to protect her. She was dreading the trip back home. It was easy to see the heaviness of death that she was bearing. I told her that I would keep her in my prayers while she was gone and that I hoped she would share with me how things had gone when she got home.

A couple of weeks later she was back in my office. And I could tell instantly that the heaviness was gone. She was absolutely radiant. And she came with an object in her hand.

I asked her how things had gone with her family, and she just smiled. She said that on their way to California they had stopped in central Oregon for a day and she had had sometime to hike through the juniper and pine forests around Bend. On her walk she had rested for a while on a boulder by the trail

and just studied the trees around her. It was then that she saw her miracle. There was the stump of an old tree. It was evident that the weather had been working on that stump for many years, heating it, freezing it, turning the wood into powdery dirt, deep enough for some seed that found itself blown there by the wind, or dropped there by some animal to take root and grow. Growing out of the stump of the tree was what she called her resurrection tree.

“It was the message I needed,” she said. “I knew it had taken years for that stump to break down and for life to grow on it. And I realized that, however long it took, the difficulties with my mother and my siblings could be broken down and that our family could be fruitful and happy again. I knew that God would make something fruitful grow in me the way he had made that resurrection tree grow out of that stump, and that the love of my father was the stump from which my new life would grow. It was a turning point for me in my grieving. I knew that I could go home again, and live and love my family, because I knew that God would bring life out of death.” She offered the object she held in her hand. “I thought you might enjoy having this,” she said. It was a photograph of her resurrection tree.

Whether or not you believe that Christ was raised from the dead makes no difference. It makes no difference at all in the acts. But it does make all the difference in the world in our fate, in our walk through life.

Do you believe Jesus is alive – that he has risen from the dead? Your answer to that question will make all the difference. Amen.