

## The Big Difference

Luke 24:1-12; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 12-26

In a delightful children's story, Winnie-The-Pooh runs into his friend, Eeyore the donkey, and asks him in surprise, "Why, what's happened to your tail?" Eeyore replies, "What has *happened* to it?" Winnie-The-Pooh responds, "It isn't there!"

"Are you sure?" inquires the donkey, and Winnie-The-Pooh hits upon a profound truth: "Well, either a tail is there or it isn't there. You can't make a mistake about it, and yours isn't there!"

If you pick up an *Encyclopedia Britannica* published prior to 1988, you can read about the Salem Church Dam, located on the Rappahannock River in Virginia. The encyclopedia tells us that this dam is 194-feet tall and 8850 feet long, a massive structure. It was proposed back in 1944 by the Army Corps of Engineers, and printed as fact in the *Britannica*. I don't know who was responsible for checking out the truth, but to paraphrase Winnie-The-Pooh, "Either a dam is there or it isn't there. You can't make a mistake about it, and Salem Church Dam isn't there." The truth is that the project was abandoned before it was even started.

For a much longer time than we would have liked, rumors have been floating around saying that Elvis Presley is still alive. One article in *USA Today* (8-16-1988) quoted one Atlanta woman, who claimed to have lived with Presley for nearly three years, as saying that Elvis himself had called the week before and spoken to her son. He reportedly said, "Son, you're not going to believe me, but this is Elvis Presley and I want to speak to your mama."

But as you well know, she is not the only one claiming to have some proof that Elvis is alive. Literally thousands of people claim that they have seen Elvis, everywhere from Seoul, Korea, to Syracuse, New York, to Orlando, Florida.

One radio station in Westport, Connecticut, once offered \$1 million for a face-to-face interview with Presley, while another radio station in Nashville, Tennessee, upped the ante to \$100 million. Three men claiming to be the King of Rock and Roll showed up, but none of them passed the screening process.

Orley Hood wrote in *The Clarion-Ledger* (6-26-1988) about a friend riding in her car in Memphis: "The light turns red. She pops the brakes, comes to a stop. The car behind rear-ends hers. She gets out. The guys in the other car climb out. It's six—

count ‘em—six Elvis impersonators. Funny clothes, big collars, long sideburns, black hair that juts out from their foreheads, then swoops back like the tail fins on an old Cadillac. The telltale upper lip twitch. The great rock’n roll sneer. Six of ‘em. One of ‘em gets real thoughtful, looks at the others and says, “What would the King do?””

There was even a book entitled, *Is Elvis Alive?* The author (Gail Brewer-Giorgio) could come up with no conclusive evidence. She wrote, “Everybody I talked to says he looks just like an older Elvis. His hair is short and rounded, and the sideburns gone. He looks to be about 200 pounds and graying.” One prominent theory is that Elvis is using the alias “John Burrows,” is living in Michigan or Ohio, and may be a doctor. His life insurance is supposedly still unclaimed, which has led many to say that he faked his death to “escape the prison of fame.”

One sure way to settle the issue would be to exhume the body buried at Graceland in Memphis, something very unlikely to happen since settling the question once and for all would cut deeply into profits. I’m not going to claim positively that Elvis Presley is either alive or dead, but to apply the profound truth discovered by Winnie-The-Pooh, either he is alive or he isn’t.

Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter-turned-itinerant-preacher, who had inflamed the entire nation of Israel with His teaching, had been betrayed by one of His very own followers. He had been arrested, tried before Pontius Pilate, convicted on false charges, scourged until His back was a bloody mass, beaten until His face was bruised and swollen, then nailed to a cross between two criminals in the horrible Roman form of execution known as crucifixion. The men on either side of Him were still alive as the time for the Jewish Sabbath approached, so the Roman soldiers beat their legs with clubs to hasten their deaths. The Man in the center was already dead, so they did not break His legs, but to be sure He was dead, one of the soldiers thrust his spear into the corpse hanging on the middle cross. Professional that he was, he was satisfied when both blood and water came gushing from the body.

Two prominent Jewish elders, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, expected this man Jesus to stay dead. They received custody of the body, hastily took it down from the cross, wrapped it in a linen cloth and placed it in an unused tomb. They rolled a huge stone across the entrance to keep out vandals and wild animals, and left with sorrowful hearts. The religious leaders remembered that Jesus had claimed He would rise again after three days, so they went to Pilate and asked for a

squadron of soldiers to guard the tomb, preventing the disciples from stealing the body and then claiming Jesus was alive.

The rulers of the people breathed easier. This man Jesus, who claimed to be the Very Son of God, was dead and out of the way. His followers had fled in terror the moment He was arrested, and only one of His disciples and a few women were brave enough to come to the place where He was crucified. They would cause no trouble. It would all die down in a few days, and things would soon return to normal.

Some strange things began to happen. The very soldiers they had hired to stand guard at the tomb came back into the city shortly after dawn on the first day of the week, trembling in terror and shock. They went to the chief priests and gave an eye-witness account of astounding events. They reported that at dawn, some women had come looking for the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth, when a violent earthquake shook the ground. From the sky an angel, whose appearance was like lightning and whose clothes were white as snow, came down and rolled that huge stone away from the entrance to the tomb—and sat on it! The soldiers themselves were so terrified that they shook and fell on the ground like dead men.

Then the angel had said to the women, *“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; He has risen, just as He said. Come and see the place where He lay. Then go quickly and tell His disciples, ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him.’”*

The chief priests hastily called a meeting with the Jewish elders to come up with a plan. They couldn’t deny the accounts of these soldiers who obviously had seen something which had terrified them in such a way. So they bribed the soldiers with a large sum of money, telling them to say, “His disciples came during the night and stole Him away while we were asleep.” The Scripture says *“And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day”* (Matthew 28:1-15).

That article in *USA Today* concerning the rumors of Elvis Presley still being alive concluded: “Why is Elvis-lives fever raging? The general feeling is that fervent fans embrace any possibility that their deified idol still lives. If the want and need are strong enough, belief comes easily.”

That sounds a lot like something that could be said about those of us who follow Christ. Is this story of the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead merely wishful

thinking on the part of deluded people who don't know any better? Have we fooled ourselves into thinking Jesus is really alive because it is something we want so much?

But either a body is there or it isn't, and even the enemies of Jesus had to agree that the tomb was indeed empty. Through the centuries skeptics have put forth various theories as to what really happened to the body of Jesus. **One theory is that the disciples stole the body.** But these disciples are the ones who ran away when Jesus was arrested, and most of them were in hiding when Jesus was dying. Aside from Judas, who hung himself in remorse, and John, who died as an old man, all the disciples were killed because they refused to back down from their story that Jesus was alive. It is not likely that they would steal a corpse when they were so afraid for their own lives, and it is not likely that they would stand by such a preposterous story when their own lives were on the line if it were not true.

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**A second theory is that the authorities took the body somewhere else.** Then why did they not produce it as soon as talk of His resurrection hit the city?

**A third theory is that the women went to the wrong tomb.** But that means the body would still be in the right tomb. Those who were so anxious to squelch these rumors would have been quick to point that out.

**Another theory is that Jesus was only unconscious, not really dead.** This theory says that Jesus revived in the cool, damp air of the tomb. But this is supposed to be after a spear thrust upward into His side, and with Jesus wrapped from head to toe in winding grave clothes, and with the large stone rolled across the entrance to His tomb, typical of Eastern burial at that time.

The women went to the tomb early on the first day of the week, after the Jewish Sabbath had ended. They were prepared to further anoint the body of Jesus with spices, proper for burial, but which had not been done in the haste to bury Him three days before. They were wondering how they were going to roll the stone away from the door. They didn't expect that He would be raised from the dead!

The disciples refused to believe the claims of the women, saying their words were nonsense. Even His own followers didn't believe the story!

When Paul wrote the Corinthians, he said nothing of the empty tomb. Instead, he pointed to the changed lives of those who had actually seen the risen Christ. From the moment the disciples came face to face with Christ, their lives were transformed. Two disciples on the road to Emmaus had met the risen Jesus, and did not recognize Him at first. Jesus appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem, then again beside the Sea of Galilee. He appeared to Peter and James, and to more than five hundred men at one time, and most of them were still alive at the time and could confirm Paul's claim.

Men and women were beheaded, thrown to the lions, and crucified because they refused to give up their belief that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, that He *'died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried,'* and *"that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures"* (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The church was born, and has withstood the hatred of its enemies, the ignorance and unfaithfulness of its friends, and exists today as a strong witness to the power of the Resurrection. In recent years Christians have become the objects of scoffing and ridicule, depicted as ignorant people who need a crutch to lean on. Thanks to the public failures of prominent Christians, and the lukewarm lives too many of us, we are under fire more than ever.

Why go through all that? Why not admit it's all a hoax and settle down to mere existence?

Because there's one big difference between Christianity and other systems of belief in the world. We worship a Risen Lord, whose power lives in us today, giving us meaning and guidance, fulfillment and purpose, hope and comfort.

On the island of Ceylon, endless lines of people pass by a glass case. Under the glass case is a gold dome, and under the gold dome is a human tooth, said to be from Buddha himself. Worshippers have even built a temple to house the tooth, called The Temple of the Tooth. Once a year they put that tooth in a specially designed casket and put it on the back of an elephant to parade it around the city.

In the Shwe Dagon pagoda in Rangoon, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) there are four strands of hair, said to have been pulled from the head of Buddha. Thousands of people line up outside the red-rock tomb of Mohammed in Mecca. Thousands of others stand in arctic cold temperatures in Red Square in Moscow to

file past the embalmed remains of Vladimir Lenin. These all freely admit that their leaders whom they worship and venerate are all dead.

But we who have had a personal experience with the Risen Christ know a big difference. We don't worship an old tooth or stringy lock of hair. We don't have an embalmed body to gaze upon. The tomb is empty, and that is the big difference.

When you stop and think about Jesus at this time of year, there are three things which stand out vividly. One is that when Jesus was born, He was laid in a manger. ***But that makeshift cradle is empty.*** Jesus is not in the cradle anymore.

The second thing which stands out is that when Jesus was crucified, He was nailed to a cross. ***But the cross is empty.*** Jesus is not still hanging there, bleeding and dying.

The third thing which stands out is that when Jesus was buried, He was placed in a new tomb which had never been used before. ***But the tomb is empty!*** The tomb could not keep Him captive, and Jesus has risen from the dead.

***The cradle, the cross and the tomb—all three are empty.*** That is the way it is supposed to be. The tragedy is that there are still so many empty hearts and lives, which Jesus longs to fill with Himself. Today, won't you surrender your emptiness to Him, that the Risen Lord Jesus might fill you with Himself?

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