

Easter 2024

I want you to imagine for a minute that you are one of the religious leaders in opposition to Jesus. You have orchestrated a situation in which an innocent man will be crucified because he made religious claims that you did not agree with. However, you still have serious concerns. So, after Jesus has died you go to Pontius Pilate. Pilate was the Roman Governor who presided over the trial and authorised the crucifixion of Jesus.

⁶²The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³“Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ ⁶⁴So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.”⁶⁵ “Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.” ⁶⁶So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

Their goal was clear, they wanted to ensure that a dead man stayed dead! On at least one occasion Jesus specifically predicted to the Pharisees that he would rise in three days. **⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Matthew 12: 40.** They had not forgotten, they consider this a deception and must be stopped at all costs.

After a family placed the body of one of its members in a burial recess in a tomb, a stone was placed over the entrance and was often sealed with clay. However, the seal here is more likely to be a cord from the rock face of the tomb to the stone itself imprinted with the Roman seal so that any tampering could be detected. Then a military contingent standing guard completes their security measures. Of course, this ends up providing a witness to the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus.

For those of us who know the Easter story well, we know that there were lots of predictions that Jesus, the Messiah would die and then rise from the dead on the third day. Jesus predicted that he would die and rise from the dead, he made these predictions throughout his public ministry and in a public way.

Let's take a look at some of those declarations. For example, when asked what He could do to prove Himself to skeptics, this was His answer: **³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.”³⁹ He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:38-40).**

Well, here's another exchange where Jesus gave the same Jonah answer: “Some Pharisees and Sadducees were on him again, pressing him to prove himself to them. He told them that the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.

² He replied, “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ ³ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. ⁴ A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.” Jesus then left them and went away. (Matthew 16:1-4).

Why was Jesus referring to Jonah? Well, the Jewish audience of Jesus' time would have known the Scriptures which included the book of Jonah. Jonah is thrown off a boat and is then swallowed by a great fish. He was inside that fish for three days and three nights. The book of Jonah in the Old Testament is written as history. That's how it presents itself. If you believe in a God that created the heavens and the earth then this story is easy to accept. So, Jesus used this story to demonstrate that a similar thing would happen to him.

When they were still trying to sort out who it was, they started following. Here's an example: ¹⁸ **Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say I am?”¹⁹ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.”²⁰ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am? “Peter answered, “God's Messiah.”²¹ Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. ²² **And he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” Luke 9: 18-22.****

This road that only Jesus, only the Messiah can walk, leads to rejection, suffering, and death. However, Jesus says he will be raised from the dead. For Jesus, suffering precedes Glory. Some attempt to explain Jesus as a religious teacher. One of many the world has not seen. A member of the religious hall of fame. They all miss the uniqueness of Christ; they all underestimate him. To miss the one who possesses the gift of eternal life is to miss life itself.

The coming of the Messiah had been talked about and looked forward to for centuries among the Jewish people. Over time, it had become linked to a set of expectations concerning the future of Israel, which focused on the anticipation of the coming of a new king who would be like the great King David. Jesus, even though he was the Messiah, didn't want people to know this too soon. Anyone claiming to be the Messiah would have created lots of civil unrest and brought about an immediate arrest by the Romans. Jesus had more to do before it was time to publicly declare who He was.

Jesus made it clear what the Messiah was really about, supremely about, was delivering people from sin and death. He came to be the sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world. He would be a suffering, Messiah. As Jesus drew closer and closer to going to the city of Jerusalem, He stepped up the frequency and intensity of telling His followers exactly what was going to take place. And there was a reason that as they inched closer and closer to Jerusalem, Jesus talked more and more about it. It would be the first time that Jesus had visited Jerusalem since he began His public ministry.

This is why we read in Luke 18, just before they entered the city, that Jesus tells them – again – exactly what was going to take place. Let me read it: ³¹ **Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. ³² He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; ³³ they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.”** Luke 18: 31-33.

Jesus was trying to prepare the disciples for his death. Death on a cross. Crucifixion. They needed to know that the cross would not be the final word. That his death would not be the end of the story. His resurrection would be. No one believed that anyone even Jesus could be resurrected. As far as everyone was concerned death was the final word over your life.

This is why, on that first Easter, the angels had to remind them of Jesus' words again! Here's what happened: **“On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: “The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.”’** Then they remembered his words.” (Luke 24:1-8, NIV).

They say seeing is believing but sometimes seeing is not enough. Let's look at what Mary Magdalene and two other disciples of Jesus saw on that first easter morning. In all four Gospels, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. In the three synoptics, she is just one of a group of women who come to give Jesus' body a decent burial. This is done with spices according to Jewish custom.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!”

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to where they were staying John 20: 1-10.

The two disciples race each other to the tomb. They discover the burial linen and cloth of Jesus still there but no Jesus. The one described as the 'other disciple' reached the tomb first. He bends down, looks in, and sees the burial garments but does not go in.

Once Peter arrives, obviously a slow runner, he follows him into the tomb. Only one disciple is said to believe and a footnote in brackets tells us why. They simply had not grasped the enormity of what had happened. In John's Gospel, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, ¹¹ **Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb** ¹² **and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.**

¹³ **They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."** ¹⁴ **At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.** ¹⁵ **He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"**

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." ¹⁶ **Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher")** John 20: 11-16.

Then Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. She is greeted by two Angels. A strong hint that something spectacular has happened. However, I think she was so grief-stricken that all she could say was in verse thirteen, "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him". Then Jesus appears and she mistakes him for a gardener. Then Jesus calls her by name and she recognises him.

Again, in John's Gospel, Jesus appears to his disciples and especially singles out Thomas who on seeing and touching Jesus says, ²⁸ **Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"** John 20:28. Finally, just before the wonderfully warm meeting that he had with his disciples including Peter, he says this; ³⁰ **Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.** ³¹ **But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John 20:31.**