

Greetings! This morning have gathered for a tradition three years older than this tower where I stand. Construction was begun on Bok Tower in 1927, the year after the first Easter Sunrise Service in these gardens, and it was dedicated in February 1929 – before the fourth sunrise service.

We come early this day to celebrate the most significant event in human history – the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christ is Risen! **He is risen indeed!**

President Lincoln is credited with posing the question; ‘How many legs does a horse have, if you call the tail a leg?’ According to the legend when his hearers said five, the president said ‘Even if I, the President, call it a leg that does not change the fact that it is still a tail, not a leg.’

I spent several years in research science before answering my call to ministry and one of the things I carry over from that time is that if we found some particular enzyme or biochemical in our testing, we could be certain it existed. However if we did not find it, all we could truly say was that it was not evident within the limits of our research.

A life of faith works that way, too. When we’ve experienced the risen Christ, we know his reality. For those who have not experienced the risen Christ, all that can be said is that within their experience they have not recognized an encounter with the risen Lord. They may have even had such encounters, but just not recognized them. Yet, multiple millions of people can personally testify to His living presence, even today.

“You are witnesses of these things,” said Jesus. And the early disciples boldly declared the truth “We have seen the Lord,”

On that first Resurrection morning more than a dozen people gave eye-witness accounts that they had experienced the impossible – a resurrected Christ who could walk alongside them for miles and not be recognized and then suddenly disappear from sight with the dawn of recognition; One who could materialize in a room behind locked doors and yet be touched, and consume a piece of broiled fish. One who was brutally crucified, pierced in his heart with a spear, confirmed dead, sealed in a tomb, and who was yet restored to life, alive and free to appear and disappear apparently at will. Since that day,

multiple millions of people have borne witness to the truth of his living presence in our lives.

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!**

It is not particularly surprising that there are people even today who want to deny the historical reality of the resurrection. The resurrection still doesn't make sense to a rational, logical, materially limited mindset! We humans so want to be in control that we are inclined to ignore, reject, deny that which we cannot explain.

So we, who with the early disciples, bear witness to an experience of the living Lord may find ourselves like Isaiah also saying "Who has believed our message?" For there are many millions in our world today have not experienced the living Lord. There are some who may have never heard. There are some who may have experienced His presence and are yet unaware. There are still others who simply choose not to believe what they cannot rationally explain.

And then there are the tail counters, who boldly proclaim that the resurrection never happened or that Jesus never existed.

Some forty years ago, when I was a lad of 18, I wanted to know if the story of Jesus was just a Biblical account, or if there was corroborating evidence in other contemporary writings. So this morning I want to share 7 reasons why we can be certain that the Resurrection of Jesus was a real, historical event.

First of all, the tomb was empty. That the tomb was found empty is testified in the writings of first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, of second century Roman senator and historian Cornelius Tacitus, of the Greek Syrian satirist Lucian of Samosata, in Roman Governor Pliny the Younger's letters to Emperor Trajan, and of the Jewish Babylonian Talmud, among others. All of these accounts are antagonistic and within the lifetime of eyewitnesses to the event, and ridiculing Christians for worshiping as the son of God, and believing that he had risen from the dead, a man crucified as a criminal. They all reference the disappearance of the body of Jesus. No one at the time disputed the fact that the tomb was empty. They just disagreed on how and why.

The major theories proposed for the empty tomb were 1) that either that someone stole Jesus' body, or 2) that the women and disciples went to the wrong tomb or 3) that Jesus had not really died – just lost consciousness and appeared dead, or 4) that Jesus somehow

slipped away in the crowd on the way to execution and that someone else was crucified in his place.

There is simply no logic for his body being stolen; the Jews and Romans had no motive to steal the body. Christ's followers were too cowardly, hiding behind locked doors in fear for their own lives, and if they had been bold enough to try, they would have had to overcome Roman guards. Jesus' burial cloths were reportedly left empty inside, hardly the act of hurrying grave robbers. The body was missing, the tomb was empty, but no human person, or persons, moved it!

It wasn't the wrong tomb - If they had gone to the wrong tomb, the authorities of the Romans and the Sanhedrin could have quickly produced the body from the right tomb to stop the resurrection stories. They did not even stoop to producing a body and claiming it to be that of Jesus. They did however acknowledge the tomb was empty, much to their chagrin.

The suggestion that Jesus could have survived the flogging, the crucifixion, and the piercing of his side with a spear, would require us to also believe that after he regained consciousness despite his weakened state, blood loss, and with no food and water, he had the strength to roll away the stone and flee undetected to parts unknown, all without leaving a trail of blood to follow and leaving the burial cloths behind. That belief would be more miraculous than the truth.

That, flogged to the edge of life, he might have somehow slipped through the crowd and that someone else was crucified in his place also has multiple problems; his weakened state, that the crowd, not wanting to be contaminated with human blood, would have had to part making room for his escape, that his resurrection appearances were not of a man recovering from a beating, but in fully restored strength. There were simply too many witnesses for that to have happened undetected. Besides, had that been the case, the tomb wouldn't have been empty!

Of course there was also the documentary five years ago purporting to have found the bones of Jesus in a tomb in the Talipot neighborhood of southern Jerusalem, suggesting that the tomb wasn't empty after all. We were asked to believe that the authorities, who were so desperate to discredit the testimony of the resurrection, had somehow missed looking in the most obvious place; the family tomb. In a poorly contrived attempt of revisionist history, blatantly

misquoting dozens of scholars' opinions, a tail counting investigative journalist ignored legitimate historical evidence and scholarly opinion to fabricate a statistically ludicrous declaration that the tomb never had been empty.

The tomb was empty – for whatever explanation – historical evidence confirms that the tomb was empty. Frankly, only tail counters can maintain otherwise.

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!**

Second, if the accounts had been fabricated, no first century author would have used women for witnesses to Christ's resurrection. Women were considered second class citizens in first century Israel; their testimony was not even allowed in court. It may seem unfathomable to us, but women in our own society have only had the right to vote for less than 100 years.

Yet women were the first to discover the empty tomb, and to hear the angels' declaration that he had risen. Even the apostles did not believe their report that the tomb was empty. Peter went to see for himself. Jesus always had respect for women and gave them the honor of being the first witnesses to his resurrection. The male Gospel writers had no choice but to report this socially embarrassing act of God's favor, because that simply was how it happened.

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The third reason we can be sure of the truth of the resurrection was the Apostles' new found courage. After the crucifixion they hid behind locked doors, terrified they would be executed next. But something changed them from cowards to bold preachers.

Anyone who understands human character knows people do not change that much without some major influence. That influence was seeing their Master, bodily risen from the dead. Christ appeared to them in the locked room, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and on the Mount of Olives. After seeing Jesus alive, Peter and the others left the locked room and preached the risen Christ, unafraid of what would happen to them.

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The fourth reason we can testify to the truth of the resurrection is the changed lives of James, Paul and other skeptics.

James, the brother of Jesus, was openly skeptical that Jesus was the Messiah. Later James testified that Jesus appeared to him and he became a courageous leader of the Jerusalem church, even being stoned to death for his faith.

Saul of Tarsus was an aggressive persecutor of the early church. When the risen Christ appeared to him on the Damascus Road, he became Christianity's foremost missionary – the Apostle Paul. He endured floggings and beatings, a stoning, shipwrecks, poverty, and years of ridicule. Roman emperor Nero finally had Paul beheaded because the apostle refused to deny his faith in Jesus because he had personally encountered Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

Even in our own time numerous antagonists who have truly examined the evidence with an open mind have discovered it's truth. Many who set out to disprove the resurrection have instead become convinced of it's historical reliability. C.S. Lewis, Josh McDowell, William Murray. For 2,000 years, encounters with the resurrected Jesus have continued to change lives.

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A large crowd of witnesses becomes another compelling testimony to the truth of the resurrection. The Apostle Paul wrote (I Corinthians 15:6) that a large crowd of more than 500 eyewitnesses saw the risen Jesus Christ at the same time. He states that most of these men and women were still alive when he wrote this letter, about 55 A.D. No one disputed the claim, apparently this account was well known; but opponents said they were all seeing things that weren't real.

It wasn't a David Copperfield act – more than 500 people saw the same event. Modern Psychologists say it would be impossible for such a large crowd of people to have had the same hallucination at once. Smaller groups also saw the risen Christ, such as the apostles, and Cleopas and his companion. They all saw the same thing, and some cases, they touched Jesus and watched him eat food.

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A sixth reason we can be confident in the truth of the resurrection is that countless people have died for Jesus, absolutely certain that the resurrection of Christ is an historical fact. The original apostles died as

martyrs for Christ, as did Paul. If they knew the claim was fictitious it is very unlikely that at least one of them would not have recanted.

Thousands of early Christians died in the Roman arena and in prisons for their faith, confident in the truth of the resurrection. Down through the centuries, thousands more have died for Jesus because they believed the resurrection is true. Even today, people suffer persecution because they have faith that Christ rose from the dead. A Christian pastor has been sentenced to death for apostasy in Iran for refusing to deny his faith in the risen Jesus. (*Reports of his execution in March were apparently false.*) Isolated groups may give up their lives for a cult leader, but Christian martyrs have died in many lands, for nearly 2,000 years, convinced that Jesus conquered death to give them eternal life.

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Finally there are the standards of Jurisprudence. The late Sir Lionel Luckhoo holds The Guinness Book of World Records for Most Successful Lawyer by virtue of his record for 245 consecutive defense murder trial acquittals. Sir Luckhoo wrote, "I have spent more than 42 years as a defense trial lawyer appearing in many parts of the world and am still in active practice. I have been fortunate to secure a number of successes in jury trials and I say unequivocally the evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt."

He was only one of many who testify that the evidence would stand up in any court of law. The resurrection of Jesus may defy logic and rationalization, it may defy reason and experience, but the evidence is compelling – Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

My friends, we, like the earliest disciples, are witnesses to the historical reality of the resurrection.

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!**

The empty tomb is the ultimate expression of hope, of life, of forgiveness, of grace. Not even death has the final say.

Because Christ has been raised, our faith is not in vain!

Because Christ has been raised, we are no longer in our sins!

Because Christ has been raised, those who have died in Christ have not perished!

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!**

Let us pray...

God of truth, of hope, of grace, and of love. We praise you for the resurrection of your son, our Lord and our savior through whom we have sure confidence of your sovereignty over death, and in your compassion and love for all humankind. Remind us that you love us so much that you chose to experience death rather than spend eternity separated from us.

May our lives be a witness to the resurrection, not to our honor but to yours. Not to our worthiness, but to yours. Not to our sovereignty, but to yours.

In the name, the grace and the power of the resurrected Jesus, we pray. AMEN