

# Did Jesus Really Rise From the Dead?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Tony Larsen

April 17, 2011

## Part I

Did Jesus really rise from the dead?

What difference does it make? Well, it makes a lot of difference to many Christians, who believe the resurrection proves Jesus was God.

For myself, I can't see that it matters much. If the things Jesus taught were good and important – and helpful for living – then they're good and important whether he rose from the dead or not. And if they're not good and helpful, then his resurrection doesn't make them so.

And as for proving he's God, I don't think it does that either. There have been other people who rose from the dead, and we don't say they're gods. For example, in our own church history, some of you may know that George de Benneville, an early Universalist in America, came back to life during his own funeral. Today, of course, we would say that he hadn't actually died but had gone into a coma, and his pulse and breathing were so weak that they were undetectable to the people of that time. But from their point of view, he died and came back to life. (It's a good thing they didn't embalm him, or they would have really killed him.)

Now, I guess I could end my sermon here. But because this question is so important to so many other people, I think it might be helpful for us to look at some of the early stories about Jesus' resurrection.

The earliest Gospel is Mark, written around the year 70, or 40 years after Jesus died. And here is Mark's version of what happened: "When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him... And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe... And he said to them, 'Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen... Go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.' And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid." (Mark 16:1-8)

That's it. That's how the Gospel of Mark ends. (The earliest gospel.) It doesn't actually say that Jesus appeared to anyone. It just says several women were told he would appear, later. That's it!

Then we have the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, written around the year 85. They do have reports of Jesus appearing to his disciples after he died, but those reports contradict each other. Matthew says Jesus appeared to his disciples in Galilee, which was in the north of Palestine. Luke says he appeared in and around Jerusalem, which is in the south.

The gospels also differ on how many women actually came to Jesus' tomb. John (22) says there was one; Matthew (28) says there were two; Mark (16) says there were three; and Luke (24) says there were at least five.

Then you have Luke saying that the women told the disciples Jesus had arisen, but Mark says they were too afraid to tell them. And when Jesus finally appears to his disciples, he says quite different things, depending on the gospel.

Then you have the problem of Luke and John saying Jesus physically rose from the dead, and that he even had people touch his body to show he was not a spirit – while Paul implies it was not a physical resurrection, but a spiritual one (1 Corinthians 15).

The only detail that everyone seems to agree on is that one or more women came to an empty tomb. Everything else is inconsistent, which leads many biblical scholars to think that Jesus' disciples may have experienced him as come-back-to-life, but that there was no actual historical resurrection. There's just too much inconsistency for that.

I remember learning this about 40 years ago – in a Catholic seminary, no less – and one of my fellow students asking, “But Father, did Jesus really rise from the dead or not?” And the priest answered, “Well, not in a way that a reporter of that time could have seen – or taken a picture of – but, yes, Christ rose from the dead in the lives of the apostles, which is the only way that really mattered.” And the rest of us were scratching our heads after class saying, “Did he say he did... or didn't?”

One other interesting detail, by the way, is that the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and John never say how Jesus eventually left the earth. I mean, they only say he died; they say (or imply) that he rose from the dead; but then what happened? Did he (eventually) die again? Matthew, Mark, and John don't say. The only gospel that has Jesus leaving his followers after he rose from the dead is Luke. And all it says there is: “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them. And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.” That's how Luke ends. It doesn't say Jesus ascended into heaven (although later versions of Mark and Luke added that in, and the Acts of the Apostles mentions it too). It just says Jesus parted. And it's the only gospel that even says that!

Now, this is a subtle point, but an interesting one. The reason Luke is the only gospel to say Jesus left his followers is that Luke is the first part of a two-part series called The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Now, the Gospel of Luke is the story of Jesus; the Acts of the Apostles is the story of the early Christian church. The reason Luke has Jesus leave is that Jesus obviously wasn't around when Paul and the Apostles were preaching. So the author of Luke had to get him off the scene somehow, in order to explain why he was no longer around. The fact that Matthew, Mark, and John don't have Jesus leave – and the fact that Luke does – is actually more evidence that Jesus never physically rose from the dead in the first place.

Now, there's an objection that can be raised against what I'm saying, and that is: If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, how do you explain the zeal and courage that his disciples had in preaching his message? How could they have such confidence – and convert so many people – if Jesus never really rose from the dead? I'll answer that question in Part II, where I'll also tell you about flying saucers, Captain Video, and automatic handwriting.

## Part II

In the early 1950's an article appeared in a suburban newspaper which read: "Lake City (fictitious name) will be destroyed by a flood just before dawn, December 21, according to a suburban housewife. Mrs. Marian Keech (fictitious name) says she has received messages from superior beings from a planet called 'Clarion.' These beings have been visiting the earth, she says, in what we call flying saucers... Mrs. Keech reports she was told the flood will spread to form an inland sea stretching from the Arctic Circle to the Gulf of Mexico."

I want to tell you the story of the events that led up to and followed this newspaper article. The names have been changed, but the events reported are from accounts of trained observers who were sent in by a psychological research team as part of a project of the Laboratory for Research in Social Relations at the University of Minnesota. The observers became members of Mrs. Keech's flying saucer group and, as such, pretended to believe the group's beliefs. The researchers heading up this project wanted to see what happens in a group when a cherished belief, to which the group is strongly committed, is proven wrong. In other words, what would the members of the group do when the flying saucers didn't come and the flood didn't happen? (Of course, they were assuming it wouldn't happen, and, as a matter of fact, it didn't.) If you're interested in reading the whole account, you'll find it in a book by Leon Festinger and others entitled When Prophecy Fails (1956). It's a classic in its field.

Here's the story: Mrs. Marian Keech woke up one morning with a tingly feeling in her arm and found herself writing in a different handwriting than usual. She asked who was writing to her and learned that it was her deceased father. Her ability to receive messages from the spiritual world gradually improved and she was soon getting communications from a being who called himself "The Elder Brother." He instructed her in spiritual matters and eventually she began receiving messages from other beings who lived on the planets Clarion and Cerus. One of these beings, who identified himself as Sananda, turned out to be Jesus Christ – only it was Jesus reincarnated as a new being in the "age of light" from Clarion.

Mrs. Keech spoke about her messages to a few friends, and eventually there was a little group of believers meeting with her and listening to the messages she received from Sananda, or the new Jesus, and from the other "Guardians" from Clarion.

In July, Mrs. Keech was told to go to a nearby air base to witness the landing of a flying saucer. She went there with a few friends but saw no saucer landing. However, she did see a man approach her with a strange look in his eye. She offered him some food and drink, but he said, “No, thank you.” As she later recalled, “His words, ‘No, thank you,’ sent electric currents to my feet and his eyes looked through my soul. I hadn’t seen him coming – he had seemed to materialize out of thin air. And then after I went back to the car to get a piece of watermelon, I looked back and he was gone – just gone. He was no place to be seen. And I felt, I became – oh, I can’t tell you; there’s no word for it. I knew something was going on that I didn’t understand. I knew I was close to something.”

She was soon to find out what that something was. A few days later her pencil wrote down these words: “It was I, Sananda, who appeared on the roadside...” Mrs. Keech was ecstatic! She had met the reincarnated Son of God and she had performed the simple Christian act of offering him hospitality. She had met Jesus face to face.

(I’d like to interrupt our story at this point to draw your attention to the parallels in the gospel of Luke. Remember, Luke’s account says that, after Jesus died, two disciples on their way to Emmaus met a stranger who spoke with them and at dinner suddenly “disappeared” – but the disciples eventually recognized that the stranger had been the risen Christ. Not all that different from Mrs. Keech’s encounter with the man who materialized out of “thin air” and “disappeared” quite as suddenly, and was revealed at the breaking of the bread.)

Anyway, Mrs. Keech and her fellow believers were soon to learn other startling facts. They learned, for example, that eons ago the people on the planet Car had divided into two groups – the evil scientists, led by Lucifer, and the people who followed the Light, led by Christ. The scientists had blown up their planet with atomic weapons and then Lucifer had led them to Earth, whence they forgot their heritage. Humans are descendants of Lucifer’s band. The people of light had gone to Clarion and other planets and through Mrs. Keech were now trying to help the people on Earth escape the same cycle of atomic destruction. So Christ would come again to the earth with a flood to cleanse it on December 21 and begin the new age of light. The group was instructed that those who believe and accept the teaching of the Guardians would be taken up into flying saucers before the flood, then transformed, and finally returned to rule over a cleansed earth.

As the date of the flood drew near, a band of about twelve believers had made quite a commitment to the belief system – quitting jobs, letting school work fall behind, giving up friends, and accepting scorn and ridicule. (Not unlike the Thessalonians in A.D. 55 whom St. Paul told to go back to work because they were quitting their jobs in anticipation of the imminent return of Jesus.) On December 17, the rest of the country began hearing about the movement through an incident involving one of the members. Newspapers all over the U.S. broke the news that Dr. Armstrong, one of the more ardent believers, had been fired from his teaching position at the University medical center for his involvement

in the group. Reporters now swamped Mrs. Keech's home with questions about Dr. Armstrong and about the prophecy. It is interesting to note that at this point the group was not interested in publicity – they turned the reporters away. They weren't even interested in making converts. Although many interested people appeared at Mrs. Keech's doorstep, most of them were sent away.

At this point, you see, the believers had more important things on their mind. Mrs. Keech had been telephoned that day by someone who identified himself as Captain Video, saying that the members who were in the Keech home should wait in the backyard to be picked up by a flying saucer at 4:00 p.m. The group believed this was a real message from the "Boys at Clarion," so they took their vigil outside. The group shivered in the snow until 5:30. When no saucer landed, the group reasoned that the message had been a drill – a test by the Clarionites to see if the believers would be ready when the real time came. After this failure of the prophecy, which could have been a threat to their belief system, the group began taking more interest in converting others.

At midnight, Mrs. Keech received a message that a flying saucer was on the way. The group again waited outside in the cold until after 3:00 a.m. Then Mrs. Keech received a message that this had been another drill. The next day, despite this further threat to the belief system, the group began to proselytize visitors even more fervently.

During the day, Mrs. Keech received a visit from a 20-year-old young man who said he was Sananda, plus several of his companions. He tried to belittle the movement and say she was all wrong in her predictions. But when she got very upset and started counter-attacking, he took back what he said. And Mrs. Keech came out of her meeting with the youngsters believing she had passed another test from the Guardians. The other members of the group said they could tell the visitors were spacemen because they had refused earthly nourishment; and three of them, they said, looked exactly alike. Dr. Armstrong said he had never before encountered such brilliant, superhuman minds as these young men possessed. Actually, this incident helped the group get over the shock of no flying saucer the night before. You see, the spacemen had come, only on Saturday night instead of Friday night, and in disguise!

On Monday morning, December 20<sup>th</sup>, Mrs. Keech received a message that the group would be picked up by a flying saucer at midnight, just before the flood that would engulf the world. The group was firmly committed and excited. They made all their last-minute preparations, including removal of all metal from their persons.

Midnight came and went. At 12:05 the group was told by the Guardians that the plan still held, but there would be a delay. Over two hours passed in hushed, intense waiting. At 2:30 the group was instructed to take a break. They began offering explanations of why they hadn't been picked up. But at 4:45 a.m. Mrs. Keech received this momentous message from God: "For this day is it established that there is but one God of Earth...and by his word have ye been saved. Not since the beginning of time has there been such a force of good and light as now floods this room, and that which has been loosed within

this room now floods the entire Earth....” In other words, because of the group’s faith and commitment, God had called off the flood! Mrs. Keech and her followers had, by their devotion, saved the world. The group was jubilant. They had not waited in vain. In fact, some of those who had been skeptical at times were now fully convinced of the validity of the movement.

And again, what would seem to be a disconfirmation of the movement to an outside observer, was a spur to the group to talk to reporters from newspapers and television and radio stations and try to win more converts to the movement. The group made efforts to proselytize as never before. They gave interviews and released hitherto secret messages from the Guardians and made every effort to win people over to the age of light.

Unfortunately for their movement, the members of the group eventually became dispersed, and they also didn’t have a lot of skill at conversion. The authors of the study, however, conclude with this note: “It is interesting to speculate...on what might have been made of their opportunities had they been more effective apostles. For about a week they were headline news throughout the nation. Their ideas were not without popular appeal and they received hundreds of visitors, phone calls, and letters from seriously interested citizens, as well as offers of money...Had they been more effective, disconfirmation might have portended [the beginning,] not the end.”

### Part III

The reason I’ve told you the story of Mrs. Keech and the flying-saucer group is that I think it shows that even when people’s beliefs seem to be disconfirmed, they can always find ways to save those beliefs – at least if they have invested a lot of effort in coming to hold them. In psychology there’s something called Cognitive Dissonance Theory, which says that if you have thoughts or beliefs that are dissonant – that is, they’re in conflict with other thoughts or beliefs you hold – you will need to do something to make them feel less dissonant.

For example: Suppose you work hard on a task, and you fail. Then you will feel tension over the fact that you put so much effort into it without getting anything out of it.. So what do you do? According to dissonance theory, you might reduce the dissonance by deciding that you really did get something out of it.

A bunch of college women were asked if they wanted to join a discussion group. Those who said yes were asked to listen to a tape recording of the discussion group they were joining. The tape was actually made to be boring but before the women listened to it, they were divided into two groups. One group had to go through a very embarrassing initiation rite; the other did not. When both groups were asked afterwards what they thought of the tape they heard, the group that had gone through the embarrassing initiation tended to say they thought the tape was very interesting. The group that didn’t ... said it was boring – which it was.

The experimenters believe that the reason the women who went through the initiation found the tape interesting was that they would experience cognitive dissonance otherwise. In other words, after you've gone through an embarrassing initiation in order to join a group, how could you admit that you spent all that time and effort for something so unworthwhile? So, to reduce the dissonance, you convince yourself that it's not boring. It's interesting!

Cognitive dissonance theory also predicts that when your beliefs are challenged – especially beliefs that you have changed your whole life for – you will need to reduce that dissonance. And one way to do that is to try to convert others to your beliefs. So, if you begin to have doubts about your beliefs, you find a need to convince others of them – because clearly, the more people who believe a particular belief, the easier it'll be for you to believe it. And that seems to be what happened with Mrs. Keech's group. Every time the flying saucer didn't come – every time the prophecy failed – the group began trying to convert other people. Otherwise, they didn't care much about proselytizing.

There seems to be some evidence of this throughout history too. For example, the Anabaptists of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century believed that Christ would come back in the year 1533. As the year approached, people started disposing of their worldly goods. When Christ didn't come, were their efforts dampened? No. As a matter of fact, in 1534 they even started sending out missionaries – something they had never done before.

A more recent case was the Millerites in America who believed Christ was coming back to earth in 1843. When 1844 came, the founder of the movement explained that the Jewish year of 1843 would not be past until March 21, 1844. When March 21 passed, the Millerites attributed the failure to a minor error in the chronology. Did the fervor decrease? No. Miller and other preachers now traveled even farther to evangelize; the group's newspapers increased their readership; and the movement gained commitment and strength as never before. But when the final date, October 22, came and went, the movement lost most of its followers (even though some claimed that Christ had indeed come, but in a purely spiritual way). For most followers the dissonance of the final disconfirmation was too great for them to keep up the belief. The group that did keep up the belief, however, is now called Seventh Day Adventists.

Getting back to Jesus: To those who say, "Jesus must have risen from the dead – otherwise, how could his disciples have been so eager to spread the word?" – I say: Maybe just the opposite is true. Sure, if Jesus rose from the dead, that might spur his disciples on. But – if he didn't rise from the dead – that might have spurred them on too, at least if they had a somewhat convincing theory of why he had to die in the first place. Now, as I said at the beginning, to me it doesn't make much difference either way. Jesus' teachings stand on their own. But in order for those teachings to have come down to us, they had to be preached and passed on. And it's doubtful that they would have been if his followers hadn't been

motivated to spread the word. And it may have been cognitive dissonance that motivated them. And if it was, then I guess I'm glad for cognitive dissonance!

Some of Jesus' teachings that are important to me are: Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute you. If you would be perfect, sell what you have and give to the poor. And blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.

Not that these teachings have ever been followed all that closely, I admit – in Jesus' time or now – but they did get passed on and now serve as an ideal for all the world. And whether that happened because Jesus rose from the dead or because he didn't, I'm pretty happy about it either way.

Now, I admit that this whole cognitive dissonance thing could be the reason that I care about Jesus' teachings. That is, I spent 20 years of my formal education learning about the Bible and Jesus and – at this point – if I didn't feel I had gotten something out of it, I'd probably feel a lot of cognitive dissonance. So that may be why I care about this subject. But I'd like to think that Jesus' ethical teachings are meaningful to be because they speak about what it means to be a true human being. (Whether that makes me a Christian or not, I don't know. I do know that these teachings are an important guide to my life.)

What else might cognitive dissonance theory have to offer me and you? Well, if you have friends or family members or even co-workers who believe things that you just can't understand how any reasonable person could believe – consider what they may have invested in coming to their beliefs...and whether it might actually be easier for them to believe what they believe than experience the cognitive dissonance they would have if they had to admit that all the history and experience and emotional baggage they've invested in it was pretty much a waste of their time.

I have a brother whose religious and political views are pretty much at the opposite end of the spectrum from mine – but, you know, for him to believe what I believe, after everything he's invested in the world he has now created for himself, might be a rather traumatic thing. It might not be a better world than the one he now inhabits.

So cognitive dissonance theory may help us understand people who differ from us in beliefs or values, or in whom we sometimes find it difficult to see inherent worth and dignity. Perhaps even more importantly, cognitive dissonance theory might help us think about our own beliefs and what we've invested in coming to hold them.

Whatever your belief, if it's something that you're always trying a little too hard to convince other people (or yourself) of – you might want to consider what you have committed to that belief and whether it would cause too much dissonance to question it, after what you've invested in propping it up.

It might be the belief that you're not worthy – that you don't deserve to succeed, or that you could never be different from what you are. It might be the belief that everyone is really out for themselves, so

you don't need to feel bad that you are. Or the belief that the problems of the world are so big, that nothing anyone does can make a difference, so why should you try?

I don't know what beliefs you may hold that on close inspection you might come to see are not true at all – but that it might be too great a sacrifice for you to challenge after what you've invested in them. I don't know what those might be. But I do know what one of mine probably is. It's the belief that the ideals taught by people like Jesus or Buddha or Martin Luther King, Jr. are far and away beyond anything I could ever be capable of. That they're the stuff of dreamers and visionaries – not down-to-earth pedestrians. But then I think of something written by minister and author Marianne Williamson in her book, A Return To Love. It's something I've read over and over, and dismissed just as often as overly optimistic and entirely too positive – but then I wonder: Why do I so resist the possibility of a hint of truth in what she says? Well, you be the judge – Here's what she says: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?”

She can't be right (!)

Could she?