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THE OTHER BUTTERFLY EFFECT

John 20:1-17

You might remember the old comic strip by Bill Waterston called *Calvin and Hobbes*. Calvin was a little boy with a penchant for causing trouble. In one strip Calvin was sick so his mother took him to see the doctor. Calvin was terrified that the doctor is going to give him a shot, so he fought him tooth and nail. He was a nightmare in the exam room. Driving home his mother said to him, “Well, you certainly were a terror in there.” Calvin answered, “I fended him off with his own tongue depressor. That’s why I didn’t get a shot.” Mom said, “You didn’t get a shot because you didn’t need one, and your behavior was inexcusable.” Calvin insisted, “All that matters is he couldn’t get close enough to stick me. He thinks I’m a little pink pincushion in underpants.” Mom sighed and said, “I hope that some day you have a kid that puts you through what I’ve had to go through.” Calvin responded, “Yeah, Grandma says that’s what she used to say to you.”

Many parents can relate to that. Laurie and I have chuckled when Toby and Anna have described to us some frustrating behavior from one of their kids and we’ve said, “Gee, I wonder where that came from.” There is a longing for life to kind of even the score, for there to be some measure of justice. But it doesn’t always work that way. We acknowledge that with a classic parental cliché. When the kids yet again howl, “But that’s not fair,” we answer, “Life’s not fair.” We say that because it’s true. Life isn’t fair. The playing field often doesn’t feel like it’s even to us, and wrongs are not always righted. We desperately want them to be. Something deep within us cries out for justice, but all too often it is in short supply. We want life to make sense, but sometimes it’s awfully hard to find the sense in it.

Wouldn’t it be awesome if we knew that everything was going to be made right in the end and things will work out the way they ought to, that there was a good plan at work and our lives had a meaningful purpose. But where is the evidence that such a thing is true? It turns out that there is an unexpected place where we find evidence that there is hope for a lot of things that we want to happen in life. There is hope not just for justice, but for meaning, dignity and hope in the face of our most daunting foe. We will see the evidence of all this in John 20:1-17.

THE DISCIPLES FOUND JESUS’ TOMB EMPTY

Jesus died late on a Friday afternoon and his body was placed in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy follower. The tomb was a cave hollowed out of rock with a massive boulder closing its opening. The next day was Saturday, the Sabbath, so no one did anything on that day of rest. Very early on Sunday morning Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus’ faithful followers, along with some other women including Jesus’ mother, went to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body. John notes that it was still dark when they went. We know from other accounts that it was some time during the 3 AM to 6 AM watch.

When the women arrived at the tomb they were shocked to find that the huge stone that covered the entrance to it had been moved away. That stone weighed more than a ton, so this was no minor deal. Roman Guards had been posted outside the tomb, but they were nowhere to be found. When the women looked into the tomb they discovered that there was nothing in it except the cloths that Jesus body had been wrapped in.

Mary, and no doubt all the women, were distraught. They went to the disciples and told them Jesus’ body was missing. It is important to observe what they thought had happened. John tells us that they reported that someone had taken Jesus’ body out of the tomb and they had no idea what they had done with it. The significant point is, no one was thinking that Jesus was alive. That’s very interesting because Matthew informs us in Matthew 27:63-64 that the Jewish religious leaders told Pilate the Roman Governor, “We remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.” They heard Jesus say that, so they wanted Pilate to post a guard to make sure no one took the body, then claimed Jesus had, indeed, risen again. They were aware of it, but, oddly, none of Jesus’ followers remembered it. They were definitely not thinking that Jesus could somehow be alive again.

Peter and “the other disciple,” who was John himself, headed for the tomb at a sprint. John tells us that he outran Peter and got to the tomb first. Scholars have debated what the significance of that was. I know what it meant. It meant John was a faster runner than Peter. John included details like that because he was an eyewitness. John looked into the tomb and saw that it was empty, but Peter, being Peter, pushed past him and bulled his way into the tomb. John says of himself, “He saw and believed.” I think he meant he believed Jesus’ body was gone, but at that point he wasn’t clear what that meant. They then went back to report to the other disciples what they had seen.

MARY ENCOUNTERED THE RISEN JESUS

Meanwhile, Mary is back at the tomb and is still convinced that someone has taken Jesus’ body. To her this is the final indignity being heaped on Jesus. However, at that point she saw two men dressed in white. She had no idea who they were. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” John says they were angels who apparently were a bit surprised at the reaction of the disciples. To them, Jesus being alive again was no surprise because they knew who he was. Plus, they had paid attention when Jesus said he would rise again on the third day. They expected exactly what he did. They didn’t understand why the women didn’t expect the same thing and were crying.

Mary was still on the “They have taken the Lord’s body” track. At that point she turned, probably to go away and encountered another person. She didn’t know who it was because it was still dark, she was crying, disconsolate and upset, so she wasn’t paying any attention. This person also asked why she was crying. Assuming he worked in the area where the tomb was she asked him what he had done with the body. At that point Jesus simply spoke her name. This would have gotten her attention because a random groundskeeper would not know her name. She looked directly at him and realized that it was Jesus, alive again after dying. He had somehow come back to life, and there he was in the flesh, talking to her!

Mary went and told the disciples that she had seen Jesus and that he was alive. I suspect they thought that she was an hysterical woman, babbling nonsense. Everybody knows once you’re dead, you’re dead. It’s game over. People don’t come back to life after dying. They were to learn the women were telling the truth.

THE IMPLICATIONS

Obviously, this passage claims that Jesus came back to life after being dead in a tomb for a couple of days. This story seems preposterous. People don’t come back to life after being dead. The story seemed so absurd that even the disciples of Jesus

 didn’t believe it. So, yes, this seems highly unlikely. Fine, suppose this is outrageous and that such a tale is simply not possible. Let’s take a few moments to consider what the implications are if the story isn’t true and Jesus did not come back to life. Paul asked the question in 1 Corinthians 15 what if Christ didn’t rise? I’d like you to think about that with me.

WHAT WOULD IT MEAN IF JESUS DIDN’T RISE AGAIN?

***There is no solid evidence of life after death***

There is widespread belief among us humans that there is at least some form of life after death. There are many thoughts about what that life is like and how one gets it, and they don’t agree. Still, the concept of life after death is persistent and pervasive. However, apart from the claim that Jesus rose from the dead there is no real, solid evidence that such a thing exists. People die and they are gone for good. That is true of everyone we have known. And that’s hard, because we all want to keep on living.

Aubrey de Gray is a biomedical gerontologist. His goal is to break the stranglehold that aging and death have on the human race. He wrote a book titled *Ending Aging*. He points out that studies have been done on lab animals that have extended their lives by as much as 30%. If the current human lifespan is 80 years, increasing it by 30% would extend our lives 24 years. The average lifespan would then be 104. That’s good, but de Gray wants more than that. He has stated that he believes the first human who will live for 1000 years has already been born and is alive now. He predicted in 2022 that a huge breakthrough would occur within the next 15 years. My reaction is, “Could you hurry it up please, because it’s getting pretty late in the game for a certain pastor I know.” What if he’s right, but it happens at the end of that window, and I’m still alive, but in a much diminished condition? Would I have to live 1000 years like that? It could mean going through a lot of Depends.

The point is, we want to live forever, but there is no tangible evidence that there is life after death. A couple of weeks ago I had a follow up with my oncologist. It went well and all seems good, but it was a little reminder that once you’ve had cancer, life is never quite the same. In my medical journey over the last 18 months I had to face the very real possibility that my life might be much shorter than I had hoped. For several months I was confronted with the fact that the disease I had could end up being terminal in relatively short order. What I found was that it is hard to envision that I will cease to exist. For me, it was surprisingly hard to accept the idea that there would be no more me at all, forever. That, I suspect, is part of why the idea of life after death is so prevalent, because it seems to us that somehow we will go on.

In an interview with the AARP magazine in 2021, actor George Clooney said, “I’m not a particularly religious guy. So I have to be skeptical about an after life. But as you get older you start thinking. It’s very hard for me to say once you’re finished with this chassis we’re in, you’re just done.” Exactly. As you get older you do start thinking, because when you’re young, you kind of think you are not going to die. But as that becomes more of a reality, you try to confront it and discover your brain doesn’t accept that this is it.

The late Christopher Hitchens was an outspoken, almost militant atheist. In his final years his agent convinced him to go on a tour debating a number of well known Christians. They enlisted Christian writer Larry Taunton to help set up the debates. Taunton toured with Hitchens. They became very close friends. At one point after Hitchens had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, Taunton says the two of them were on a walk and happened to discuss John 11 where Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will live even though he dies.” Hitchens asked with an almost scoffing tone, “Do you really believe this?” Taunton said, “You know I do.” Hitchens was quiet for a moment and then said, “I’ll admit that it is not without appeal to a dying man.”

Abraham Lincoln said, “Surely God would not have created such a being as man, with an ability to grasp the infinite, to exist only for a day. No, no, man was made for immortality.” So yes, in us there is this great desire, even a sense that we are intended to live beyond the few decades we have on earth. But there is no proof, no real evidence that it is so, if Jesus did not rise from that tomb. There is only wishful thinking, and that’s not very comforting.

***There is no way to be certain about God***

Like the belief that there must be life after death, belief that there is a God, a Creator who is responsible for the existence of all that we see, is pervasive among humans. There is evidence that such a being exists. Science has determined that the universe had a starting point. It hasn’t been here forever. So how did it get here? “Well, see, there was this stupendous explosion.” Hold on. If nothing existed, how did it blow up?

There had to be a cause, and when you look at the evidence of design and intentionality that exists in so many ways, it is reasonable to conclude there was a designer and maker that put all this into motion. But that leaves us wondering where this being is and what he is like. Such a being would have to be unimaginably powerful, to be sure, beyond our ability to fathom. Profoundly smart to be able to do what he has done. But beyond that, we have no idea about the nature of this being. Is he kind or is he cruel? Does he care about us, or is he totally indifferent? We don’t know.

This is disturbing because a being so powerful could be a big threat. The whole science fiction genre of movies has a sort of schizophrenic aspect to it. There are movies that depict powerful beings from other planets who are peaceful and who only want to help. But then there are those like the classic *Independence Day*, where powerful beings come to destroy. How do we know about God? If Jesus did not rise from the dead, we have no solid way of knowing. All we have is the widely varying opinions of other people with no way of knowing what’s right.

***There is no forgiveness***

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then his death was a tragic event in history, but history is replete with tragic events. This is a huge matter because all of us need forgiveness. Guilt is a real component of human nature because none of us is what we know we should be. Jordan Monge is an author who grew up in a family of atheists. Both her parents were atheists, and she recalls declaring to friends at the age of 6 that she didn’t believe in God. By middle school she had arguments against religion generally but especially Christianity that none of her peers could answer. She found most Christians to be vapid and devoid of real answers. But in college her faith in atheism was challenged. At Harvard, where she went to school, she encountered Christians who had thoughtful answers to her arguments and even challenged her beliefs. She began to see some huge holes in her own philosophy. She eventually became convinced that Christianity was intellectually tenable, but it didn’t touch her heart. She didn’t feel the need for the cross of Christ. But then she began to take a good look at herself. She said she realized, “I was painfully arrogant, prone to fits of rage, unforgiving, unwaveringly selfish and I had passed sexual boundaries that I’d promised I wouldn’t. Yet I could do nothing to right these wrongs. The cross looked like the answer to an incurable need. When I read the crucifixion scene in the book of John for the first time, I wept.”

We all have that sense that we need forgiveness. But if Jesus did not rise from the dead, if his death was nothing more than the sad end to a good man, there is no hope there. Where else are we going to find that forgiveness? It doesn’t help us when other people say, “Oh, you’re too hard on yourself. You’re a good person.” Yeah, good compared to what? We still know the truth about ourselves. We long for forgiveness, but there is none available.

***There is no justice or meaning in life***

French philosopher, politician and university professor, Luc Ferry, who is an atheist and secular humanist, despite his own beliefs, credits Christianity with creating the novel idea that all humans have dignity and value. He says that message that all men are created equal is rooted in the resurrection of Christ. No resurrection, no God, no basis for human dignity and value. Yes, we are all equal in having no intrinsic value or meaning, and we have no unalienable rights. There are no human rights just as there are no amoeba rights or sea slug rights. There is no justice, no guarantee that wrongs will be righted some day. There is no real meaning to anything we are or do. This world doesn’t mean anything, it doesn’t matter, and neither do our lives have any real meaning or value.

Famous Italian film director, Frederico Fellini, described himself as going through life drifting on the tide. He said, “I just go on cutting, editing, shooting, looking at life. What I am waiting for I do not know. Perhaps the Martians will come and save us.” Good luck. He knew we need to be saved, but if your only hope is Martians, you’re going to be disappointed.

I get up early on Sunday mornings when it is still dark. On these chilly wintry mornings I put on sweats to keep warm, but I try to do it quietly so I don’t wake Laurie. When you first get up and it’s dark your brain is kind of fuzzy. I sometimes have trouble figuring out the sweatshirt and somehow put it on backwards. I know immediately when my face is in the hood that’s supposed to be in the back that something is wrong, and I have to take it off and start over. I know, you’re thinking, ”Why am I listening to a guy who can’t figure out a sweatshirt and dress himself?” That’s a valid question. I sometimes wonder the same thing. But my point is, in the dark it can be very difficult to know what to do. The simplest things can be confusing. If Jesus didn’t defeat death then we are left in the dark about the most profound issues of life.

THERE IS REASON TO BELIEVE JESUS DID RISE

It is common in our culture to encounter people who say that anything in the religious, spiritual or moral realms is subjective, a matter of personal opinion. Each person must find his or her own truth. Believe in the resurrection of Jesus or don’t, each opinion is equally valid. Sean McDowell, a university professor, tells how he addressed this idea in class. He put a jar filled with marbles on his desk and asked, “How many marbles are in the jar?” They respond with different guesses. Then he tells them there were 188 marbles in the jar. He asks, “Which guess was closest?” They agreed that the person who said 168 was closest. He points out that they understand that the number of marbles in the jar is an objective fact, not one affected by personal preference. Then he passes out Starburst candies to his students. He asks, “Which flavor is the right one?” They object, the question makes no sense. Each person has their own preference and there is no one right answer. He says, “That is correct. The right flavor has to do with personal preference. It is a matter of subjective opinion or preference, not objective fact.” Then he asks, “Are religious claims objective facts, or are they a matter of personal opinion?” Typically students say religious claims are a matter of personal opinion or preference. But then he points out that Christianity is based on an historical event, a fact of history. The resurrection of Christ either occurred or it didn’t. It is not a matter of subjective opinion. It is either a fact or it is not, meaning Christianity is also either a fact or it is not.

But that raises the issue of how we can know whether it was a fact or not. The evidence that we see in the world is that such a thing is impossible. However, the whole point of the resurrection was for Jesus to do the impossible to prove that he was who he claimed, God revealed in human form. If he just did the possible he would prove nothing other than that he was a capable human being. If that’s all he was, then all we have seen today is correct, there is no hope of life after death, we can’t know the truth about God, there is no forgiveness and life really has no meaning at all. Why should we believe Jesus defeated death?

To begin with, we know that something dramatic and powerful had to have happened after Jesus’ death. How is it that after Jesus died, his little movement exploded and expanded to the place where he has 2 billion followers today? Former Boston University professor and historian, Paula Frederickson, not a believer in Jesus, says it is clear that the first Christians claimed they’d seen the risen Jesus. She says, “That’s what they say, and then all the historic evidence we have afterwards attests to their conviction that that’s what they saw. I’m not saying that they really did see the raised Jesus. I wasn’t there. I don’t know what they saw. But I do know as an historian that they saw something.”

Years ago in 1993 the newspaper carried the story of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who was the leader of the Jewish movement Chabad Lubavitch. It said that he was anointed Messiah in a ceremony watched by followers all over the world. His followers chanted, “Our master, our rabbi, our teacher, King Messiah, live forever.” He didn’t live forever. He died not long after that. Where are his followers today? Scattered, no longer following him. Why didn’t that happen with Jesus of Nazareth?

What are the alternatives to what happened after Jesus was executed? One is that the story of Jesus’ resurrection was a legend. This is a popular explanation often bandied about by supposedly intelligent people. The idea that over hundreds of years the stories about Jesus gradually grew and eventually claimed that he had risen from the dead. So the resurrection narrative is in the category of King Arthur and the knights of the round table, something that happened in the distant past, so long ago you could make almost any claim, like young Arthur pulling the sword Excalibur out of the stone. Hey, it could have happened. You can still try to do that at Disneyland.

Some say the resurrection is a myth, typical of ancient myths. There were a number of ancient resurrection stories. But read the stories of Ishtar and Tammuz or of Osiris who all supposedly are brought back to life and compare them with the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection. They are fundamentally different. The myths sound like fairy tales, but the Gospels read like history, with eyewitness details like the name of the guy Peter attacked with a sword and which disciple got to the tomb first. The difference is obvious.

That theory is also incompatible with historical facts. How does it explain that within weeks of the death of Jesus thousands of devout Jewish people, for whom worshiping a man was the worst of blasphemies, an abhorrent taboo, were worshiping the man Jesus as Lord? The theory crashes on the rocks of the reality of the New Testament books that we know were written within in some cases 15 years of Jesus’ life, and none more than 50 years later. The theory is totally blown up by the fact that we know with total certainty that Saul of Tarsus, a hater of Jesus and his followers, claimed to have seen Jesus alive a couple of years after Jesus’ execution and became an outspoken advocate for faith in Jesus. The legend theory absolutely is impossible with the facts of history.

Another suggested alternative is that Jesus wasn’t fully dead (only mostly dead, like Wesley in *The Princess Bride*). This one says maybe Jesus just passed out on the cross. Given the horrific and prolonged torture he was subjected to, this would not be surprising. So he passed out, and later on he revived and everyone decided he had risen from the dead.

This one has some serious weaknesses as well. Jesus was executed by Roman soldiers who were trained to do their job, and were held accountable to do it. If they failed, their consequences were severe. To fail to make sure a victim was dead would have been dereliction of duty. Mark 15:44-45 tell us that the Roman governor, Pilate, summoned the centurion who commanded the troops and asked him if he was sure Jesus was dead. The soldier affirmed that was the case.

Another problem with this is that Jesus was wrapped up in cloths like a mummy. This theory is that once in his tomb he revived, unwrapped all the cloth, somehow moved the stone covering his tomb, which weighed more than a ton, overcame the squad of soldiers guarding his tomb, then in his weak and beaten state presented himself to his disciples as their risen Lord, miraculously back from the dead. I’m sorry, I just don’t have that much faith.

Some have suggested that the disciples made a mistake and went to the wrong tomb. They then made up stories that they had seen Jesus alive. This theory has a fatal flaw. The opponents of Jesus were fit to be tied when his followers started claiming Jesus was alive, that he had conquered death. All they had to do was go to the tomb where Jesus’ body was, open it up and offer it for viewing. Christianity would have died right there.

Another popular theory is that Jesus’ disciples created a conspiracy. If I had to choose the most likely alternative, this would be it. The disciples of Jesus stole his body, then claimed they’d seen him alive again. They loved Jesus so much that they wanted to keep faith in him going.

This one has fewer weaknesses than the other options, but it has some big holes. It requires us to believe that the disciples overcame a squad of Roman soldiers that was guarding the tomb. Then they made up a story and lied about it despite the fact that doing so went against everything Jesus was and taught. But there are two death blows to this theory. The first is that it requires that all of the disciples maintained this lie over years, and did so even when facing death. All of them except John were killed for proclaiming Jesus as the risen Lord of all, and not one of them ever cracked and admitted it wasn’t true. Not one. That’s just not human nature. Somebody would have talked in order to save his life. That’s just reality.

The second problem is even bigger. It is that Saul of Tarsus guy. He wasn’t in on the conspiracy. He would have wanted no part of it. He swore he saw Jesus, risen from the dead and it changed his life. That happened several years later. There is no explanation for that if the whole thing was a hoax. This is such a problem some opponents just play the “Paul was crazy” card. But Paul wasn’t crazy, and he went to his grave joyfully proclaiming that Jesus was alive.

There is a theory that the disciples hallucinated seeing Jesus alive. Or maybe it was mistaken identity. If people can claim they saw Elvis at a gas station in Utah after he was dead, why not Jesus. But there were 500 people who saw Jesus. They all had the same hallucination? No way. Plus, this wouldn’t have lasted a week because again, the authorities who were desperate to end this stupid Jesus movement would have just rolled out his dead body. End of story.

In the book, *The Sign Of The Four*, Arthur Conan Doyle had his famous detective, Sherlock Holmes, say, “When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” Rising from the dead is truly improbable, but if Jesus was who he claimed he was, then it was not impossible. The only other alternative to these theories is that Jesus did the miraculous and came back to life after being dead.

CONCLUSION

This has enormous implications for us. It means there is proof, historical proof, that God is there and has revealed himself to us. He has made it possible for us to know him. It means there is historical evidence that there is life after death as Jesus promised. It means we can be forgiven and loved just as we are. It means there will be justice and wrongs will be righted, and it means our lives matter. In fact, they are full of meaning. It means all people are created equal and are endowed by rights given by God.

We have heard about the butterfly effect, the theory that a butterfly flapping its wings in China can result in a hurricane in the US. Today We are thinking about a different butterfly effect. The 20th century British journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge, became a follower of Jesus late in life after being an agnostic for many years. Toward the end of his life he said, “For myself, as I approach my end, I find Jesus’ outrageous claim ever more captivating and meaningful.” He saw himself being like a butterfly being released from its chrysalis stage and ready to fly away. He wrote, “Are caterpillars told of their impending resurrection? How in dying they will be transformed from poor earth crawlers into creatures of the air, with exquisitely painted wings? If told, do they believe it? I imagine the wise old caterpillars shaking their heads. No, it can’t be, it’s a fantasy. Yet…as the night clocks tick remorselessly on, I hear those words: I am the resurrection and the life, and feel myself to be carried along on a great tide of joy and peace.”

Just over two weeks ago we had a great day in our family. A couple of years ago a little boy was born into a terrible circumstance. His mother has a tragic life, a victim of a deeply dysfunctional family, she was addicted to drugs to the extent she was using them even during pregnancy. Her son was born addicted as a result and his health was seriously imperiled. He had to spend his first months of life in the neo-natal ICU. His parents essentially abandoned him as they pursued drugs and got into trouble with the law. Our son and daughter in law, Toby and Anna, took him in as a foster child when he was about 6 months old. The past year and a half they have been dealing with the court system as they sought to adopt him as their own. On March 15 that long journey came to an end and a new one began as Jackson Peter Myatt was officially declared by the State of California to be the son of Toby and Anna Myatt. He was saved from a life that was going to be a living hell and brought into a family that showers him with love. That evening Anna told little Jackson that he was now her son and she would love him forever. Jackson, who is just beginning to speak words, said, “I am a Myatt.” I don’t know how much he understands. It can’t be much. But somehow he knows he has a new identity, one of a beloved child forever.

Because of the resurrection of Jesus, we can be adopted into God’s family. We are saved from a life of hopelessness, emptiness, guilt, frustration meaninglessness and loneliness, into a new life of hope and love with a new identity, that of beloved children of God. We are like Muggeridge’s butterflies. We emerge from the cocoon glorious creatures of great beauty, but we have an advantage over the butterflies, for we know that the metamorphosis is coming. Therefore, as Muggeridge said, we can be carried along by a great tide of joy and peace.