

Easter Sunday (Year A) – April 16, 2017

ACTS 10:34A, 37-43; PS 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23; COL 3:1-4; JN 20:1-9

If you've ever watched the debates on **YouTube** between the well-known, “**New Atheists**” and various **Christian apologists** on the questions of **creation**, the **origin of the universe** and the **existence** or non-existence of **God**, you notice something so ironic, it's almost comical.

While these **atheists** dismiss religion, *supposedly* in favor of **reason** and **science**, it is the **proponents of the creation worldview** who consistently provide the most convincing evidence from **physics**, **cosmology**, **science** and **reason** to argue their case.

Modern **science** and **physics** show, for example, that the rate of expansion of the universe makes it *necessary* for the universe to have had a **beginning point**—that is, a point **before which** there was, in fact, **nothing**—no *time*, no *matter*, no *space*. The way the universe actually behaves would not be possible without a beginning point, and, as a result, the question of *how something—the universe*—could have come from **nothing**, cannot be avoided...whether you believe in God or not.

This **undeniable** fact so confounded famous atheist **Richard Dawkins** that he has actually suggested—*in an interview that you can watch for yourself on YouTube*—that *alien-like creatures* must have designed life in **their corner of the universe** and “**seeded**” it on earth. Later in that same interview, Dawkins proceeded to ridicule the God of the Old Testament as a hateful, murderous tyrant.

But that *still* leaves unanswered the question of who made these “**aliens**”, not to mention their **home**.

For Dawkins at least—*when push comes to shove*—is not *really* that there **isn't** a creative intelligence behind the universe. He just insists that it *not* be the God of the Bible whose creative power comes with expectations—**moral expectations**—of his creatures. **The fact is:** Dawkins just can't tolerate that creative intelligence **being** the Christian God...because one has **obligations to** that kind of God.

And that's the crux of the matter. There will always be skeptics **who**—*no matter what evidence you produce*—will refuse to believe—because of their **personal agendas**. And this attitude is certainly not restricted to our modern times.

Recall, for instance, when Jesus raised **Lazarus** from the dead in **Chapter 11** of the **John's Gospel**. One chapter later, Lazarus and Jesus were eating dinner at the home of **Martha** and **Mary**. And yet, as the Gospel tells us:

...the chief priests planned to put Lazarus also to death, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. (Jn 12:10-11)

Talk about ignoring the evidence in favor of an agenda!

“We don’t care that he was dead and is now—*miraculously*—alive again. We don’t want to lose our “congregation”, and our influence over them, so we have to kill Lazarus...and this Jesus who raised him from the dead.”

Much earlier in the **John's Gospel**, when the evidence of Jesus's divinity first started to appear, we're told how Jesus viewed those who were so wowed by him:

...Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all, and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well. (Jn 2:24-25)

Imagine God's dilemma!

He *creates* us out of love. After we reject that love, he *pursues* us in order to save us. He *came to us* in the person of **Jesus Christ**—the very *incarnation* of love. He leaves all kinds of evidence of his love—some **natural**, some *miraculous*—and there are *still* many who *choose to reject* both the **evidence** and—by extension—the *love*.

All of this gives us a good framework to consider, then, what we celebrate today:

The Resurrection of Jesus.

Nonbelieving naysayers dismiss Christians as **anti-intellectual buffoons** who need a **fairy tale-like character**—**God**—to makes us feel better about a **meaningless universe**. But let's consider the *evidence in favor* of Jesus actually rising from the dead.

Exhibit A: The empty tomb

In today's Gospel account, **Mary Magdalene** discovers that Jesus is “**missing**” from the tomb and runs to tell **Peter** and **John**. They didn't believe her at first, so they ran to check it out themselves. Here's what happened:

Simon Peter...went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. For they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead. (Jn 20:6-9)

Ok, so they didn't get the full picture *yet*. But they **did** consider the evidence seriously.

Jesus was missing.

But what does this **tell** us?

The tomb had been **sealed shut** and then **guarded** by **Roman soldiers**. So the idea, for example, of the **disciples** overtaking soldiers—*from members of the most lethal military on the planet*—and then **stealing the body**, is rather far-fetched. Such a theft would certainly have caused a major stir—not to mention the arrest of the perpetrators.

What about the **authorities stealing the body**? Well, that would be rather unwise because it would have *perpetuated* the rumor of **Resurrection** rather than **refuting** it. And even if the authorities *had* made off with Jesus' body, they could have later **produced** his corpse to discredit the **Resurrection** claim. But they **didn't**.

What about **grave robbers**? If there *were* robbers, they left most valuable items behind—the **expensive linen burial cloths**. And these robbers, **unwise** as they would have **had** to have been to leave the *loot* behind, would likewise have had to overpower those same Roman soldiers and then break the seal on the tomb...only to fail to finish the job once inside.

Exhibit B: The corroborated sightings of the Risen Jesus

The New Testament reports that Jesus appeared to more than **500 people at once** (cf. 1 Cor 15:6). Now, if he had appeared only to a couple of people, then a non-believer

might be inclined to dismiss their claim as a **hallucination** or a **hoax**. But these 500 people were **together**...at the same **time**...and reported the same **thing**. And there were still **others** who saw him—Mary Magdalene, Peter, the disciples on the road to Emmaus...and, of course, St. Paul on the Road to Damascus, to name a few.

But the most convincing evidence of all is...

Exhibit C: The transformation of the Apostles

What more plausible explanation could we have for the way the Apostles went from a bunch of “**Chicken Catholics**”, hiding out in a locked room, to being **fearless, articulate** preachers of the Gospel who were not dissuaded from their mission even by *threats of death*. Considering that they had nothing to gain **in this life** from sticking by their message, why on earth would **they** be willing to **die** for a *myth*? All they had to do was retract their claim and they would have been spared execution... but they stood firm in their claim...**and died for it!**

While these are all compelling facts that cannot be easily explained away, they are, nevertheless, not *necessary* to someone who *has* had a **personal encounter with Jesus**. They only serve to strengthen an already well-founded faith. We saw this play out in Jesus’ Easter Morning encounter with **Mary Magdalene** as reported in the **John’s Gospel**:

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (Jn 20:11-18)

The key moment for **Mary Magdalene** was when **Jesus** pronounced her name and penetrated her heart with the experience of *being known*. After a person experiences Jesus so personally, *they don't need to be persuaded by arguments from physics or cosmology, or anything else, in order to be convinced*. They **know**...and most importantly, have *been known by*...**Jesus himself**.

Following **Mary Magdalene's** encounter with **Jesus** at the tomb, Jesus appeared to the **Apostles** who had locked themselves in a room together *“for fear of the Jews”* (cf. Jn 20:19)—that is to say, out of fear that those who had crucified Jesus were coming for **them** as well.

Considering **whom** Jesus appeared to, **and in what circumstances he did so**, can help us increase the probability of a similar personal encounter with him in our own lives.

In **Mary Magdalene's** case, she actively sought Jesus by *going to where he was known to have been*.

In the **Apostle's** case, they were *gathered together* when Jesus appeared to them.

In light of that evidence, *what kind of place fits both conditions*—a **place** where Jesus is known to be and where people who have encountered Jesus **gather** together?

Once such place is **the Church**—*particularly during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*.

Many people have claimed that they felt like God spoke to them, personally, through the **Scripture Readings** or the **homily** at Mass. Others have experienced a profound sense of Jesus' presence when the **Eucharist** was elevated over the altar and the words, *“Behold the Lamb of God”*, were pronounced.

They were moved by something...and that something wasn't nothing!

When a person **encounters** the Risen Lord, they *still* may not be able to convince a skeptic. Naturally, when we've been touched by **that** kind of love we want others to experience it as well. The best evidence we can offer to anyone else is, in fact, **that joy...that certainty**. Whether or not someone else is convinced by that joy, well,

that's not for us to concern ourselves with. The doubt or rejection by skeptics—while disappointing to a convinced believer who sees someone depriving themselves of the same **love, joy and peace**—does nothing to diminish the **believer's** faith.

St. Thomas Aquinas said it best:

To one who *has* faith, no explanation is *necessary*. To one *without* faith, no explanation is *possible*.

<https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/t/thomasaqui186900.html>

Whereas an **explanation** may *indeed* fail to move a stubborn skeptic, a **personal encounter** with Jesus really *does* change everything—*reordering all of a person's priorities*. The things of this world no longer captivate and delight such a person, because they've **discovered**—or rather have been *discovered by*—**someone** greater than anything...or anyone...this world has to offer.

The things of this life do serve their purpose—after all, we need **money, food, shelter, clothing** and **some possessions**—in order to live. But for a convinced believer, **who has known and is known by** the living, *Risen Jesus*—none of these things any longer assume a **disproportionate importance** in their lives because they already possess the “*pearl of great price*” (cf. Mt 13:46)—**Jesus himself!**

Jesus Christ *indeed* suffered and died.

Jesus Christ *indeed* rose from the dead...“*just as he said*” (cf. Mt 28:6).

What would *your* life be like if an encounter with the living Jesus **could** completely transform *you* as it has **so many others** before you?

Well...

You don't have to just **imagine** it.

You don't have to just *speculate* about it.

You can *ask* Jesus for it...and then...prepare yourself to **never be the same again**.