

Many years after the drafting of the Declaration of Independence... Thomas Jefferson wrote a book... titled: *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth: Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French, and English*. (Book titles were very long... back then.) But today... most people simply call it "*the Jefferson Bible*"

This Bible was Jefferson's "private declaration of independence"... we might say... from historic Christian theology. Thomas Jefferson edited out (with razor blade precision) all the parts of the Gospels... that didn't fit his deistic theology. ... He removed all supernaturalism... including references to the Trinity... as well as to the divinity... miracles... and (of course) the resurrection of Jesus.

His Bible begins with Jesus' birth... minus any mention of angels and prophecy... and it concludes with the cross and the tomb (but not an empty one): "*There laid they Jesus. And rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.*" That's Jefferson's version of Matthew's gospel. ... To Jefferson... Jesus died and was buried — period... end of story.

But... what kind of a gospel is that...?... To end where Jefferson ended... is an "inadequate ending to a 'Gospel!'" Gospel means "good news."

If Jesus didn't rise from the grave... then we as Christians are wasting our time. If the true gospel ends with: "*There laid they Jesus. And rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed*"... then our faith is a lie folks... and we are simply fools playing a religious game.

In 1 Corinthians 15:19 Paul says that we are to be "*pitied more than anyone*" if we have hoped in Jesus *in this life only*. ... But if Jesus did rise from the grave... then the situation is drastically different.

It gives power for Christian living. We cannot live for God by our own strength. It is only as His resurrection power works in and through us that we can do His will and glorify His name.

It assures our future inheritance. Because we have a living hope, we can experience hopeful living. A dead hope grows weaker and weaker before it eventually dies. But because Jesus Christ is alive, we have a glorious future.

1 Peter 1:3-5 (ESV)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

But - Thomas Jefferson... leaned on his naturalistic and rationalistic worldview... and could not accept what the Bible says about the resurrection... or the future (in store) for those that believe it. Many people today... in this nation that he helped give birth to... have the same worldview.

We live in a day when religion is looked at as a matter of preference or opinion. Many people believe that all religions are fundamentally the same; the differences are only superficial. "*Simply go about your life and choose what works best for you... and along the way... the question of truth can be*

*completely **avoided***” ... But living that way is a huge and costly mistake. Belief is irresponsible and *empty*... if it's not based in ***truth***.

We hear (all the time)... *"What is true for you may not be true for me"*... (But let me tell you something)... no one *really* believes that! After all... what would you think if you went to withdraw your money at the bank... and the teller said, *"I don't feel like you have money in your account"*? ... How the teller *felt* wouldn't matter to you if you had the money in there and needed it.. Whatever is true for you had better be true for that teller as well. Either you have money in your account or you don't. ... The last thing we want banks to do is to give out money based on how they *feel*! (You see)... The world cannot operate on the very flawed philosophy - *"What is true for you... may not be true for me"*

In most areas of everyday life... we know instinctively to operate on the basis of ***truth*** instead of *feelings* and *preferences*. ...Yet... when it comes to the most *important* questions in life... questions that deal with where you will spend your eternity... we simply must not be so flippant... and disregard the question of *truth*? ... Common' ... do we really think God governs our eternal future based on what *we* prefer...?

Our passage this morning (Matthew 28:1-15) reports to us... ***the*** event... in all of history... and... in light of that event... each of us must peruse *truth*... not feelings. ... Our eternity hangs on whether or not we accept the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now for those of you... who have already decided to believe in the resurrection of Jesus... my purpose is to *strengthen* your belief... to push it further away from any tendency to doubt it whatsoever. ... Or for those

times when you go through a season of doubt... (and every Christian has them from time-to-time)... you will have the fact of the resurrection to guide you back. ... I want to do this by exploring what is the most plausible explanation for the facts.

For example: There's no question... (even among the most secular of scholars)... that around 2,000 years ago an entirely new religious movement and community were formed — almost overnight. ... And immediately... hundreds of people started claiming that Jesus rose from the grave... even when it meant they could die for such a claim. A fast-growing movement of people... which now makes up one-third of the world's population by some estimates... survives as a result. So how do you explain that? What is the most plausible explanation for it...?

(You see) plausibility should be the criterion for "proving" the resurrection... because there's virtually nothing in history that can be established with 100-percent certainty. ... For instance... can we really know with 100-percent certainty that George Washington was the first president of the United States? ... Is it not possible that he was just a mythical figure that people wrote about and invented in order to encourage the citizens of a new country? ... Now we're *almost certain* this is not the case... but we can't say with 100-percent certainty that he was president.

(Or let me put it this way)... Someone once said, "*We can't know with 100-percent certainty that all of us were not created five minutes ago... complete with built-in memories and food in our stomachs.*" ... You can see how much of a headache it is to establish perfect certainty for any past event! ... With all historical proof... the question is "What is *most* plausible?" or "What can be established with the *most* certainty?

I believe that it is... that the resurrection actually happened! ... So Let's examine – now – the first verse of today's passage...

Matthew 28:1

The previous chapter has concluded with reports of a guard on the tomb of Jesus to prevent body-snatchers from raiding the tomb in order to perpetuate a 'deception' about his resurrection. He had been buried by Joseph of Arimathea... the stone has been sealed on Pilate's orders... and a detachment of soldiers placed on guard.

Since the Sabbath was over... and the related restrictions against any unnecessary work were no longer in effect... two women brought spices to the tomb... so that they could properly anoint Jesus' body according to Jewish customs. ... Remember that last week we saw these same women standing some distance away from the scene of Jesus' crucifixion... and carefully observing all of the developments of that fateful afternoon. ... They had observed Joseph of Arimathea as he and Nicodemus removed Jesus' body from the cross and very hurriedly buried it in a nearby tomb. Time restraints (more than likely) had them do just the minimum to Jesus' body... for burial. And the love that these women had for Jesus... now brought them to the tomb... at the dawn of this first day of the week... to **completely** perform the final burial rite.

Matthew 28:2

When Jesus died... an earthquake rumbled through Jerusalem. Now... another powerful earthquake shook the earth... though that is not what caused the stone to move. Rather... an angel of the Lord moved the stone

out of its position. Once the stone was removed from the tomb... the angel simply sat on it... awaiting the arrival of the women.

The stone was **not** rolled away to permit Jesus to come out. (He will later walk right through the walls of a closed upper room... where the disciples were meeting. He didn't need the stone to be moved so He could exit.) ... No... the stone was rolled back so that the people could see for themselves that the tomb was empty.

Matthew 28:3

The brightness of the angel could only be described like that of a flash of lightning... hurting the eyes to look at him. His clothes reflected the brightness of his heavenly origins. ... Celestial beings are usually represented as clothed in white... (throughout Acts... Daniel... and many times in Revelation.) ... And isn't it interesting... that Matthew **begins** and **ends** with angelic activity? ... Angels are involved with both the birth... and resurrection of Jesus (1:20; 2:19).

Matthew 28:4

The appearance of this angel was sudden and obviously unexpected. The guards posted by Pilate to secure the tomb... **thought** they were prepared to meet **any** challenge to the safety of the tomb. But these highly trained soldiers were unprepared for **this**. ... The appearance of this angel was so intensely bright... that the guards literally shook with fear. All of the Greek manuscripts and other English versions add the phrase "*and became as dead men.*"

Matthew 28:5-6

“He is not here. He has risen!”

To verify the truth of his statement... the messenger invited the women to inspect the burial vault closely. ... What did they see in the tomb? ... They saw the graveclothes lying on the stone shelf... still wrapped in the shape of the body (according to John 20:5-7). ... Jesus had passed through the graveclothes... and left them behind as evidence that He was alive. (Try to picture them in your mind’s eye as laying there like an empty cocoon.) ... There was no sign of struggle... the graveclothes were not in disarray. ... Even the napkin (which had been wrapped around His face) was folded carefully in a place by itself.

He had often predicted that he would rise... but the disciples did not understand it... and consequently did not expect it (Matthew 16:21, 20:19.)

Matthew 28:7

Jesus had earlier promised to meet the disciples in Galilee (we saw back in 26:32.) ...The prediction was originally uttered in the context of Jesus’ prophecy that the disciples would desert Him (26:31). (LISTEN) It is the power of the resurrection... that transforms the deserters back into disciples. That is why my hope is that our study today will serve to draw any of us back... if we wander.

Galilee was where it had all begun. That was where the Lord had grown up... where He had called His disciples... where most of His miracles had

been done... where His greatest messages had been preached. He would meet the disciples in Galilee.

But right now... the apostolic band was in disarray. One of the disciples was dead... one was still bowed by the burden of denial... all were living in fear... all were confused. The Lord intended to reconstitute the group... and recommission it. ... He would meet them on a mountain... and forge them anew... into the nucleus of the church... that was soon to be born.

Matthew 28:8

I love that Matthew records their mixed emotions of “*fear and great joy*” (v. 8). ... Fear and great joy... are emotions that sometimes go together in real life. ... (Think back) ... How else would you describe your own wedding day? At least it wasn't *great fear* and *some joy*. Whatever fear they had (and who wouldn't have some fear after seeing what they saw?)... their great joy pushed them on their mission.

Matthew 28:9

(Now... I have to stop here... and point out something that is very important for every believer to realize...) Notice please... that it was "**as they went to tell his disciples**" ... that the Lord met them. ... Why is that so important? ... Because we need to know that there is no substitute for prompt obedience to the revealed will of God... if we want more and greater revelation.

Do you want God to reveal more to you about Himself... or His will for your life...? ... Be careful to obey all that He has already asked you to do! Be diligent.

John 14:21 (ESV)

Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”

These women were obeying the Lord’s command from the angel... and Jesus... Himself... appeared to them.

Matthew 28:10

Let me repeat something that I mentioned last week... because it is significant to the plausibility of this story. ... The witness of women was considered unreliable in that culture... yet Jesus goes against the culture... by revealing himself to the women... and telling them to bear His message to the other disciples. ... (Stop and think)... This detail is definitely not one that ancient Christians would have invented... because it did not appeal to their culture.

But Jesus - Himself... reaffirmed the angel’s message... and He does something else. ... He referred to the disciples as His “brothers.” ... There is something exceedingly tender in Jesus calling them that. In a gesture of forgiveness and reconciliation... this use of the family metaphor indicates great love and patience... since the disciples could be said to have “*run away from home*” in abandoning Jesus. Jesus welcomed the prodigals back home again.

Matthew 28:11

Two groups hurried into the city: the women and the watchmen. ...The women were overwhelmed with triumph. ... The watchmen were overwhelmed with terror. ... The women were about to confront the world with the most tremendous fact in history. ... The watchmen would soon confront the world with the most tremendous falsehood in history. ... While the women were worshipping the living Christ... the watchmen were plotting to destroy their witness of the living Christ.

Once the guards had recovered their senses... they had to file a report of what they witnessed. ... But they didn't go to Pilate. Instead... notice... they went to the chief priests of the Jews. (Rather than go to their commander... they took a different approach.)

By now... some of the soldiers had realized that they were in a desperate plight. The Roman seal had been broken... the stone had been rolled away... and the body was not in the tomb.

For a Roman soldier to fail in his duty... was an offense punishable by death. ... But the soldiers were shrewd ... They did not report to Pilate or to their superior officers... they reported to the Jewish chief priests. (You see)... They knew that these men were as anxious to cover up the miracle... as were the soldiers themselves!

Matthew 28:12-15

The minds of the religious leaders were already made up about Jesus... and they did not want to be confused by the fact of his resurrection. This intensified their guilt.

Perhaps they really believed that the disciples had used the occasion of an earthquake to steal the body... but most likely they made up the story with full knowledge that it was a lie. They had accused Jesus of being a deceiver... but now they were the ones willfully deceiving people about Jesus. ... They had refused to believe Jesus was the ultimate interpreter of Moses and the prophets... and they would not be persuaded even when someone was raised from the dead.

Hardened unbelievers... (those who will not believe)... go away in a rage from the empty tomb. ... They invent untenable theories to account for it. The sad truth is that people remain unbelievers... not because they cannot believe (for the proof of Christ's resurrection is overwhelming)... but because they *will not* believe. ... We see this unwillingness in the Sanhedrin's attempt to explain away the hard and inconvenient evidence of Christ's triumph over death... and we see it so often today... with unbelievers.

What a weak and foolish lie the Sanhedrin and the guards fabricated! Can you imagine a witness appearing in a court of law to announce to judge and jury, "*Sirs, I consider myself a credible witness to the event I am about to describe because I was sound asleep when it happened*"? The story was ludicrous. If the guards were asleep... how could they know what happened? ... How did they know that the disciples stole the body?

And then there are several other loopholes. Why would Roman soldiers on duty to secure the tomb... be sleeping... when they were supposed to be on watch... and could (in every other instance) lose their lives for it? ...

Even if they were sleeping... wouldn't the commotion of rolling the gigantic stone have awakened at least one of these well-trained Roman guards?

John 20:6-7 (ESV)

Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.

The *regularity* and *order* of the grave-clothes show that the body had not been stolen. When men rob graves of the bodies of the dead... they do not wait coolly to fold up the grave-clothes... and lay them carefully by themselves. They grab the body and run.

No... it just isn't plausible. And neither is this: if Jesus died and was buried... why hasn't anyone (ancient or modern) produced the rotted corpse... bones... or some evidence of a *not* empty tomb? No early critic of the immediately rising Christian movement — ever identifies a tomb in which Jesus' body remained.

If the disciples stole the body... why did not the Sanhedrin or the Roman governor arrest the disciples... bring them to trial... cross-examine them as to the whereabouts of the body... and convict them of grand larceny... tampering with the governor's seal... and grave-robbing? ... Nothing would have put a swifter end to the report of the resurrection than a body identified as Jesus of Nazareth. There was of course no body to produce.

The concocted story about the body of Jesus being stolen... was the best one that they could manufacture. The chief priests bribed the soldiers to

use this story... and they attempted to calm any of the soldiers' concerns that they might be reprimanded or punished by Pilate for dereliction of duty. *We will persuade him. We will convince... or satisfy him...* so that he shall not punish you. They knew from the character of Pilate... that he too could be easily bribed.

Mark Twain once wrote that a lie can go around the world while truth is still lacing up her boots. There is something in human nature that makes it easy for people to believe lies. It was not until the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the powerful witness of the Apostles, that the Jews in Jerusalem discovered the truth: Jesus Christ is alive! Any sincere person who studies this evidence with an open heart will conclude that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a historic fact that cannot be refuted.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus... of which an account is given in this chapter... is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian religion... and is attested by the strongest evidence that can be adduced in favor of any ancient fact. ... Even if you do not want to believe the Bible's account of what happened... here are some undeniable truths... that secular history affirms.

The disciples... and many others... all testified to seeing Christ alive... after He was put to death. ... They affirmed it in Jerusalem... in the presence of the Jews... before the high priest and the people.

They gave every possible evidence of their sincerity. They were persecuted... ridiculed... scourged... and put to death for affirming this. Yet not one of them ever expressed **the least doubt** of its truth. ... They endured everything... rather than to deny that they had seen Him. ... They

had no motive in doing this... but the love of truth. ... They obtained no wealth by it... no honor - no pleasure. ... They gave themselves up to great and unparalleled sufferings... going from land to land... crossing almost every sea... and enduring the dangers... toils... and adversities of almost every known region... for the simple object of affirming everywhere that a Savior died and rose. ... If the resurrection was a lie... they would have known it. ... Do people do all of this for something that they know is a lie...? ... It is not very likely at all.

And then there is this undeniable truth: **The world believed them**. Three thousand of the Jews themselves believed in the risen Savior... on the day of Pentecost... just fifty days after His resurrection. ... Multitudes of other Jews believed during the lives of the apostles. Thousands of Gentiles believed also... and in three hundred years... the belief that Jesus rose had spread over and changed the whole Roman empire. ... *Had* the apostles been deceivers... that was the age (and place) in which they could most easily have been detected to be liars. ... Yet that was the age and place when converts were most rapidly multiplied.

Suppose I told you the following story: In preparation for last year's Superbowl (between the Philadelphia Eagles and the New England Patriots)... Eagles Quarterback... Nick Foles called me in order to get some tips... on how to read New England's defense. I showed him how to recognize when New England would blitz up the middle and from either side... so he could avoid the pass rush. As a matter of fact... I also helped him develop a much faster release... whenever he would throw the ball. My buddy Nick was so impressed that he asked me to come to the Superbowl... and flash him signals from the sideline of what New England

would do. ... The only reason I couldn't do it... was because I had to be here in La Pine that Sunday to preach. I already had a busy schedule for that week... but rest assured... this actually happened. Would you believe me? If not... how would you discredit my story?

To discredit this ridiculous story... you could easily go to Nick Foles (or his agent) and say, "*Do you have any clue who Jim Hofman is or how little he knows about reading NFL defenses?*" To which he would say, "*I have no clue who Jim Hofman is and I'm pretty sure he's a terrible analyzer of defenses.*" (And *that* you could verify—on both counts!) You could also speak with people who have watched NFL games with me to either confirm or discredit my claims.

In a similar way... individuals in the first century were able to investigate the claims of the resurrection by speaking with the apostles and the hundreds of eyewitnesses who had physically seen Jesus. ... In fact... these eyewitnesses to the risen Christ... were openly telling people about what they'd seen... and some were even losing their lives for it.

Proclaiming the resurrection was not in their best interest. As Pascal said, "*I believe the witnesses that get their throats cut*" ... It is... therefore... highly unlikely that the early Christians fabricated the idea of the resurrection. ... To suggest otherwise is to stop doing history and to enter into a fantasy world of our own.

Jesus died on the cross and actually rose from the grave. Do you surrender to the universal authority of Jesus (that this means He has)...? Eternity depends on your answer to that question.

Romans 10:9 (ESV)

...If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.