

**Story #3: Your Deliverance,  
Pt. 6  
*My God***

**The Three Stories of the  
Bible**

**John 20:24-29  
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On an autumn afternoon in 1977, Helen Brach, heiress to the Brach candy fortune, flew into the busiest airport in the world, stepped into a crowd and disappeared. Conspicuous only by her absence, the court presumed her dead and convicted a man in 1995 of contributing to her death. Still, nobody has ever seen Ms. Brach dead or alive; no body has been found, and there are continuing suspicions about the involvement of others. Unlike Helen Brach, the story of Jesus is not that of a famous, disappearing person. Nor is it of a famous reappearing person. Jesus was not a first century Elvis who became popular with the culture, had masses visit his grave, spawned look-a-like contests and was the object of many sightings. Christianity was birthed in people who saw Jesus alive; then saw him dead; and then saw him alive again.

Their experience is the central message of Christianity. The point of Christianity is Jesus. The focus in Christianity is not on Jesus' teaching. I've had atheists tell me that they wish that was the focus. However, it is not. The focus of Christianity is Jesus: his life, his death and his attestation through the resurrection as Lord.

The Apostle Paul declared:

*I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me-- that Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. <sup>4</sup> He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, as the Scriptures said. <sup>5</sup> He was seen by Peter and then by the twelve apostles. <sup>6</sup> After that, he was seen by more than five hundred of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died by now. <sup>7</sup> Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. <sup>8</sup> Last of all, I saw him, too, long after the others, as though I had been born at the wrong time" (1 Cor. 15:3-8, New Living Translation).*

The essence of God's good news is not that God commands us to love, but that a rescue mission is unfolding for humanity. What is most important, according to Paul, is that Christ died in agreement with the prophetic Hebrew Scriptures, that he was buried and rose from death in accord with Hebrew prophecy, and that he appeared to many still alive during Paul's time. Paul goes on to say that, though he was born at the wrong time to be a witness of the resurrection, he too is a witness of the resurrection through his spiritual encounter with the risen Lord.

The point of Christianity is Jesus. Over and over, the Bible speaks of the good news about Jesus. The apostles and evangelists proclaimed a resurrected and returning Lord. In Peter's very first sermon, he explained how Hebrew Scriptures foretold the resurrection of the Jewish messiah. He declared:

***This prophecy was speaking of Jesus, whom God raised from the dead, and (pointing to the group with him, he said,) we all are witnesses of this (Acts 2:32).***

In his first message to worshipers at the Jewish temple, Peter declared:

***You killed the author of life, but God raised him to life. And we are witnesses of this fact (Acts. 3:15).***

In explaining Christianity for the first time to those who were not Jews, Peter said:

***...we apostles are witnesses of all Jesus did throughout Israel and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by crucifying him, but God raised him to life three days later. Then God allowed him to appear, not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen beforehand to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead (Acts 10:39-41).***

The resurrection of Jesus and its implication formed the central message of the first believers. Did they act on fact or fiction? Here are the unmitigated facts

*To have a resurrection, one must die.* Jesus suffered a public execution. His death was assured by Roman soldiers. It was mourned by observers. The expectations and skepticism of his followers were consistent with his death. Archeology verifies and validates that the gospels accurately describe the obscene and lethal practice of crucifixion.

Moreover, *Jesus was buried*. Two Jewish leaders, colleagues of Jesus' opponents, Joseph of Arithamea and Nicodemas took charge of his body. The apostle John describes the location of the grave and women from Galilee witnessed the burial.

Third, *the tomb was found empty*. The first Century opponents of Christianity acknowledged that and attempted to explain why.

Fourth, *people testified to seeing Jesus alive*. The most credible appearances are the accounts with the women. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, Palestinian women were not considered good witnesses. It did not advance the cause for the gospel writers to list women. The most ancient Christian creed about the resurrection, well known within 20 years of the event, omitted any reference to the women. The writing about Jesus' appearances to women cannot be explained historically outside that it happened that way. Ironic isn't it? The least credible testimony in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century is the most credible in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Even more, these appearances were unlike the mythological, hallucinogenic or deceptive sightings of Elvis. The appearances of Jesus occurred during a defined period, happened with individuals, small groups and large gatherings and took place at all times of the day and on all kinds of occasions.

Beyond the truth of an empty tomb and Jesus' appearances, there is much more that points to his resurrection. Interestingly, it was circumstantial evidence rather than eyewitness accounts that convinced a jury that the Oklahoma City bombing figure, Timothy McVeigh, was guilty. Bomb residue on his clothes, his ticket for the Ryder truck, his discussion with others that revealed his anger and thoughts about bombing the federal building, along with some other facts created a compelling case. In the same way the impact of the resurrection has left an indelible crater of circumstantial evidence. The impact of this event on behavior is undeniable.

For example, the disciples, who would know if the resurrection was a hoax, suffered and died for their belief. What caused them to do that? James, the brother of Jesus, didn't believe in his brother before the resurrection. Why did he convert following it? Rabbi Saul was an opponent of Christianity and a companion and confidant with the early and continuing opposition to the resurrection. Privy to the facts against the resurrection, how could he convert?

Have you ever wondered why the Jewish people as a social group with their distinct identity didn't disappear from the earth like most every other ancient race? While other groups intermarried and lost their distinctiveness, the Jewish people adhered to certain social practices that they attributed to their God. These practices defined their lives and identity as Jewish people. However, ten thousand-plus Jews of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century changed their views about religious sacrifices. Ten thousand-plus Jews changed their hope and believed salvation came through faith in Jesus rather than observing the law. Ten thousand-plus Jews, who tenaciously observed the Sabbath, began worshiping on Sunday, the day of resurrection. Ten thousand-plus Jews adjusted their centuries-old understanding of God in order to worship Jesus. Ten thousand-plus Jews changed their

vision of the promised Messiah. These were pivotal beliefs in the Jewish community that ordered their social life. Their change points to a defining event.

From the beginning, the first believers engaged in communion and baptism which makes no sense if there was not a death and resurrection. How do you even explain the emergence of the church in a land where people were committed to other faiths?

Thomas was a skeptic. He was a skeptic because he saw Jesus dead. *"I don't know what you saw, you probably saw something, but it couldn't have been Jesus,"* he kept arguing. *"I will have to see and touch the very wounds I saw him suffer during his death, before I believe."* When Jesus appeared and had Thomas touch those wounds, Thomas cried the very thing that ten thousand-plus Jews came to believe: ***"My Lord and my God!"*** Explain that!

The resurrection says, *"There is a God! There is a God! There is a God and he cares about you!"* That's what Thomas found, a God powerfully working and caring about him. That's why he cried. That's why I cry too. The resurrection also says, *"There is a future! There is a future! There is a future that God is preparing for you."* I don't need to fear death. I've got a future. So do you. I bury my loved ones in hope, how about you? The resurrection says, *"There is a power!"* God exercises it for you. This power is at work now. You need to learn about it and see what it can do. The resurrection says, *"There is an experience that will confirm your belief and change you."* St. Paul was a witness because of his experience after the resurrection. He wasn't born at the wrong time, and neither were you. Today, people are uttering the very words of Thomas because they are encountering and experiencing, much like St. Paul, Jesus today.

You are not alone. You need not fear. God has acted on your behalf. He has come to restore you as his child and partner, raising you to life, as he did with Jesus. You with Jesus are God's prince and princesses. You are loved. Believe the good news! Embrace Christ today!