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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 28:1-6

In the end of the Sabbath Day, as it began to dawn towards the first day of the week, early in the morning, came Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary to see the sepulcher. And behold, there had been a great earthquake; for two angels of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. And their countenance was like lightening, and their raiment white as snow; and for fear of them the keepers did shake, and became as though they were dead. And the angels answered and said unto the woman, Fear not ye; for we know that ye seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay, and go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him; lo, I have told you. And they departed quickly from the sepulcher with fear and great joy; and did run to bring the disciples word.

Fear not, for I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central fact of the Christian religion -- the most important article of the gospel -- the demonstration and proof of all the rest. If the resurrection is not true, if Jesus does not live now in a glorified, but tangible, physical body, then he was no better than any other good man; he possessed no power by which we may overcome sin and death, and we have no hope of anything beyond the grave. "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain, ye are yet in your sins." (1 Cor. 15:17) That is why we boldly assert our belief that Jesus lives.

How do we know he lives? We should like to submit six lines of evidence this morning which we believe prove that Jesus lives. First, Jesus himself prophesied and promised that he would rise from the dead. Second, credible, reliable eye-witnesses testify to having seen him in the body after his death. Third, the circumstantial testimony of the great change which came over the disciples after the date of his purported resurrection. Fourth, the witness of the empty tomb. Fifth, the agreement of the four gospels as to the major outline of events. And sixth, the testimony which is peculiar to the religious movement founded by Joseph Smith, which corroborates all the rest. To this we might well add the proof of Old Testament prophecy, but time prohibits a full discussion of our subject.

Let us turn now to our first line of proof -- that Jesus himself promised and prophesied that he would rise from the dead. This promise is recorded in thirteen different passages in the four gospels. His disciples did not understand what he was saying, but his enemies did; and that is the reason for the seal of Rome on the tomb, for the guard of soldiers.

Whatever else Jesus was, he was not a liar. His bitterest enemies could find nothing upon which to convict him or moral wrong when he stood before Pilate. Was this great and good man, this Master Teacher, this Prophet, this Messiah, a liar, a fraud, an imposter? If so, what was his purpose? He got strangely little profit for his trickery and fraud. He never had a copper penny he could call his own; he never held public office or wielded any secular power; He never owned house or home or farm or business. What did he expect to gain? Jesus was not the kind of person who would deliberately tell a lie, but if he did not rise from the dead he was a liar several times over.

Let us turn next to our second line of proof -- the testimony of credible, reliable eye-witnesses. Did anyone see Jesus alive and in the body after his death? If the Bible record is to be trusted, the answer is an unqualified "Yes." And there are evidences that we do not have the whole story in the Bible, and that if we did, the evidence would be even stronger than it is. The 24th chapter of Luke names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, as the women who discovered the empty tomb, and who ran and told the disciples. Mark's account names the two Marys and Salome as the ones who discovered the empty tomb. Peter also ran and looked in to see for himself. (Luke 24:11) All these are witnesses to the fact that the tomb was empty.

The first to see Jesus in his resurrected body was Mary Magdalene, according to Mark 16:8, and John 20:11-16. Matthew says that Jesus appeared to both Marys as they ran to tell the disciples what the angels at the tomb had said. (Matt. 28:7) The resurrected Jesus was seen by Cleopas and an unnamed companion as they journeyed on the road to Emmaus, thinking over the sad events of the preceding days. (See Luke 24:12-33; Mark 16:11) At first he was not recognized, because they were confident and sure that Jesus was dead, but as he broke bread for the evening meal, their eyes were opened, and they knew him. So great was their joy that in spite of the darkness and the lateness of the hour, they immediately set forth for Jerusalem, where they found the eleven meeting together and discussing the eye-witnesses testimony of Simon, or Peter: "The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared unto Simon." (Luke 24:33) Cleopas and his companion told their story; and while they talked, "Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and said unto them, Peace be unto you." They thought Jesus was a ghost, or spirit; but he took some pains to disabuse their minds of that fallacy: "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I, myself. Handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as you see me have." And then as if to add further incontrovertible proof, Jesus ate with them, a piece of broiled fish and a honey comb. (Luke 24:38-41) (Compare John 29:19,20)

Thomas, one of the eleven, was not in that meeting, but was present eight days later when the disciples again met on the first day of the week. Jesus showed himself again on this occasion. After Thomas had proved the reality of Jesus by seeing and touching his hands and his wounded side, he was constrained to believe the resurrection and confess the divinity which it proved with the words, "My Lord and my God."

The third appearance of the resurrected Jesus is described in the 21st chapter of John. The disciples had fished all night in the sea of Tiberias and caught nothing. At Jesus' bidding they let down their nets on the right side of the ship, and nearly swamped their fishing boats with the size of their catch. On that occasion, too, Jesus ate with them, and gave Peter the commission, "Feed my sheep."

In the fifteenth chapter of 1st Corinthians, verse 5, Paul gives corroboration to the statement of Luke 24:33, "The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared unto Simon," when he says that Jesus was seen of Cephas, (another name for Simon Peter) and then of the twelve. He mentions James as another eye-witness, and mentions an occasion when Jesus was seen of "above five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep." There is no mention in the gospels of this event, nor of the appearance of Jesus to James, but this does not mean that these facts are uncorroborated. Paul was writing this Corinthian letter about 55 A.D., while these things were still fresh in the memory of many. Luke and Paul were contemporaries and companions, travelling in Caesarea in 57-59 A.D. If Paul had written a lie, Luke could reasonably be expected to have challenged Paul's statement, but there is no record of such a challenge. And to cap the climax in the parade of eye-witnesses, Paul names himself as one who saw the resurrected Lord.

The third line of proof is the transformation of the disciples. Men do not imagine what they do not believe. The disciples, in spite of Jesus' promises which they did not understand, were not expecting a resurrection. They were beaten, stunned, hopeless, ready to quit and go fishing. Even the women were not expecting a resurrection, but came to the sepulcher after the Jewish Sabbath with spices and ointments to embalm a dead body. Yet, a few days after the resurrection we find these beaten, stunned, bewildered, timid men transformed into flaming evangelists for Christ, and preaching him boldly in the streets of Jerusalem to some of the very men who had been instrumental in his death, ready to face martyrdom for their belief in the resurrection.

Men do not dedicate themselves to a cause that is irrevocably, hopelessly, finally and completely lost. Nothing could explain this change in the disciples save some startling, unbelievable, but true revelation of Christ's divinity, such as his resurrection from the dead. The church came into existence as a fellowship of those who believed in the resurrection. All the preaching of the apostles was of a risen, resurrected Christ.

Now let us look at the fourth line of proof -- the circumstantial evidence of the empty tomb. Modernism attempts oftentimes to make the resurrection of Jesus and his continued life spiritual only -- without the physical. We don't know and maybe cannot understand the changes which took place in his physical body. But we do know that there was some connection between the body that was laid in the tomb, and the one seen by the women, the apostles, and the five hundred brethren. Although identification was not always immediate, they knew him -- his voice, his mannerisms in breaking bread, his miracles. They saw the prints of the nails, the spear wounds in his side. If the body did not rise, what happened to it? It was not in the tomb. Some have tried to explain that Jesus merely swooned, and the coolness of the tomb revived him. But previously he had been too weak from scourging to drag his cross to the place of execution. Pilate marvelled that he was so soon dead. To make sure that Jesus was really dead, a Roman soldier gave him a final spear thrust in the side. When Jesus was taken from the cross, he was quite dead. Roman soldiers -- experts in their business - had seen and certified to that.

If Jesus' friends removed his body from the tomb, how did they do it, and for what purpose? They either removed it quickly, quietly, and stealthily, or they fought the guards for it. They did not remove it in haste, because John records that the grave clothes were left neatly folded in the empty tomb. They could not have been very stealthy, because it was necessary to break a seal and roll back a heavy stone door with considerable noise and confusion. It is not likely that soldiers of the guard, who were responsible with their own lives for the safekeeping of the sealed tomb, would all go to sleep at once. The theory of a violent capture of the body is untenable, because the guards reported no fight, bore no signs of violence. There was no investigation. No one was arrested; no one was punished, either for the theft, or for falling asleep on guard. The guards were bribed to say that the disciples stole the body while they slept; but how could the guards know what happened while they were asleep? And after all, why should the disciples want to steal a dead body? They couldn't hope to prove anything by it; they couldn't make it their king; and they had no faith or belief in a resurrection.

Did Jesus' enemies steal his body? Why would they want to? The disappearance of the body would start and spread the very rumors they desired to suppress, that he had risen as he said. The stone, the seal, the guards were there to prevent that very thing. But suppose for the sake of argument that Jesus' enemies did steal his body. When the disciples proclaimed, "He is risen!" why didn't these enemies produce the body and answer, "He is dead -- and here is his body to prove it." No -- the body-snatching theory raises more questions than it settles.

The fifth line of evidence is the agreement of the four gospels and of Paul. When men plot together to tell and perpetuate a lie, they decide on a story, rehearse it, and tell it exactly the same way every time. If the four gospels and Paul agreed in every insignificant detail, you could be reasonably sure that all of them were lying. But as you may have noticed as we presented our evidence, they disagree on many minor points. But in the larger, more important details, there is agreement -- the agreement of honest men who tell the story as they saw it and remember it -- not the perfect agreement of a pack of liars perpetuating a hoax.

Was Jesus ever seen in any other time, or any other place than those mentioned in the four gospels and by Paul? Latter Day Saints can answer, "Yes." The Book of Mormon gives an account of his visit to the people of the American continent shortly after his resurrection. He offered them tangible, visible evidence of his bodily presence. He established his church among them, instituted the ordinances of that church, ordained his ministry. He taught them arts and sciences; he began the golden age of those peoples. The Book of Mormon is a powerful, inspired, additional witness that Jesus lives.

Joseph Smith, the Latter Day Prophet, bears witness also that Jesus lives. He saw him first in vision in a grove of trees, as the Father turned to the Son and said, "This is my beloved Son; hear him." Years later, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon saw him in vision on the Sunday following the dedication of Kirtland Temple, and bore testimony in these words: "And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him; that he lives; for we saw him, even on the right hand of God...." Others have offered a similar testimony that Jesus lives, and that because he lives, we too shall live in a resurrected, perfected, sanctified, glorified body. This is the hope of the gospel, without which every other hope is vain. This is the life which is in us, and in his Church, working to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. The Lord is risen; he is risen indeed. Jesus lives!