

## “Why Do You Look for the Living Among the Dead?”

Luke 24:1-12

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Something remarkable happened in the city of Jerusalem in about the year AD 326. Something precious was *found*. Unearthed. Restored to new life ... after *two centuries* of being buried.

Christianity had been a legal religion in the Roman Empire for only 13 years. After three centuries of on-and-off persecution, Christians could now worship God freely, openly, without fear of recrimination, or imprisonment, or execution. You could now say, “Jesus Christ is Lord!” – and you wouldn’t be *killed* for it. This was Emperor Constantine’s first great act of kindness toward Christians throughout the Roman Empire. And it was by no means his last. He returned property to the Christian Church that had previously been confiscated. He made generous financial contributions to the Church. He built grand basilicas for Christian worship. He exempted Christian clergy from certain taxes. Scholars debate whether Constantine ever genuinely *believed* the great truths of the Christian faith, but there is no question that his policies were the most favorable towards Christianity that the world had ever seen. In 321 he ordered that Sunday should be a day of rest throughout the entire Empire. In 323 he decreed that Christians were under no obligation to participate in state sacrifices. In 325 he convened a great Council at Nicaea, to resolve some theological disputes that were causing stress throughout the entire Church. And in 326 he sent his mother, a devout Christian woman named Helena, to the Holy Land with a mission: find the places that are sacred to Christians ... restore their glory ... establish places of prayer.

So Helena, the 78-year-old mother of the Emperor, spent the next two years in Palestine, traveling, praying, asking questions, finding things, building things. In Bethlehem she found the grotto where Jesus had probably been born ... and built a church there. On the Mount of Olives she found the place where Jesus had probably ascended into heaven ... and built a church there. And in Jerusalem ...

Well, let’s back up. Jesus had been killed at a place called “Calvary” or “Golgotha,” outside the walls of Jerusalem, in about the year 30. His body was placed in a nearby tomb. About ten years later the walls of the city were expanded, and those sites became part of the city. Thirty years after that, most of the city was destroyed by the Roman army. Another sixty years later, the Emperor Hadrian rebuilt the city and re-settled it as a Roman colony. When Helena arrived nearly two hundred years later, there was in Jerusalem a pagan temple, that Hadrian had built atop an artificial mound. The local Christian bishop had informed Constantine that *something important* was buried under that mound. Something *precious*. Constantine ordered that the pagan temple be removed, and excavations begin.

Hadrian had piled a considerable amount of earth onto this particular spot, and then had paved it all over; Constantine had all this broken up and removed. Helena supervised the work. A historian living at the time recorded what happened next: “As soon as the original surface of the ground, beneath the covering of earth, appeared, immediately, and contrary to all expectation, the venerable and hallowed monument of our Savior’s resurrection was discovered.” The empty tomb had been found. Helena and the bishop, overjoyed, sent word to Constantine; Constantine quickly sent word back commanding that “a house of prayer worthy of the worship of God should be erected near the Savior’s tomb on a scale of rich and royal greatness,” and that “by an abundant and unsparing expenditure they should secure the completion of the work on a scale of noble and ample magnificence.” In other words: *Build a church here. Make it big. Make it grand. Make it more beautiful than anything else in the world. I’m sending money – as much as you need.* Why such lavish expense? Because Constantine realized: *the greatest event in the history of humankind happened RIGHT HERE. Nothing* should be greater than this.

And so it was built: the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; “the Church of the Holy Tomb.” Helena found a rock formation nearby, which she identified as the place where the cross was mounted. There’s a story from later on that says she even found three authentic crosses here, one of which healed a woman, when she touched it, who had been near death. That part of the tale is probably legendary, but it doesn’t really matter. In all likelihood, this *was* where Christ had died; this *was* where his body had been laid; this *was* where God had raised him from the dead. Biblical archaeologist Jerome Murphy-O’Connor writes: “Is this the place where Christ died and was buried? Yes, very probably.” We can’t be 100% positive. But the evidence points in that direction. The bishop knew that the tomb was there. How did he know that? Because Christians *remembered* that that’s where it had been. And why would Hadrian have gone to considerable trouble and expense to build such a massive artificial mound on *that very spot*, unless there had been something he was *deliberately* trying to cover up, hide, *erase* from history? As the fourth-century historian wrote: “This sacred cave, then, certain impious and godless persons had thought to remove entirely from the eyes of men, supposing in their folly that thus they should be able effectually to obscure the truth.... Unhappy men! they were unable to comprehend how impossible it was that their attempt should remain unknown to him who had been crowned with victory over death.” For nearly *two hundred years* that sacred spot had been covered over and buried ...

... but God’s truth will *always*, eventually, see the light of day.

So there is in Jerusalem today a magnificent building called the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It is the third church on that sacred spot: the first burned down in the 7<sup>th</sup> century; the second was destroyed in the 11<sup>th</sup>. It is a fascinating building, irregularly shaped, simple yet grand, maintained by no less than *six* different branches of Christianity. You can kneel under an altar in an upstairs chapel, and touch the rock where – we think – the cross of Christ was mounted. At the other end of the church, if you can endure a very long line, you can enter a shrine built on the site of the empty tomb.

Or, alternatively, if you want to experience something simpler, something that *looks* and *feels* like what it would have really looked and felt like two thousand years ago, you can visit a place called “the Garden Tomb,” a little ways to the north, where you can actually enter a real, ancient tomb. That’s this picture up here. That is not Jesus’ tomb. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor says “Unfortunately there is no

possibility that it is in fact the place where Christ was buried.” But it gives you a general sense what his tomb might have looked like. You can go in it. I did. It’s ... well, it’s an empty tomb.

That is the whole *point* of Easter, after all. *He’s not there.* Not in either one of those tombs.

But sometimes ... we go looking for him anyway. What are we hoping to find?

It’s been a rough week in the world. It seems that a lot of weeks these days are rough weeks, but some are definitely worse than others. From the Notre Dame fire to the tragic death of another Mason young person, I found myself in several conversations with different people this week about just how much *bad news* there is in the world, how much pain, how much suffering. It’s true. There *is* a lot of bad news out there. A lot of tragic deaths, senseless acts of violence, cruel things that people do to other people, horrible accidents, seemingly endless amounts of needless suffering. Too much death.

Some people look at it all wonder, “Can there really be a God?” Others ask for proof.

And we – we point to an empty tomb. “He isn’t here,” the angels said. “He has been raised.”

Why do we look for the living among the dead? Because there’s a part of us that just wants to *know*. To have something *tangible* to hold on to. Some *demonstration* of the power of God. Something to help us on those days when the suffering seems endless and all we want to do is cry.

The thing is ... with Christianity ... with this gospel message ... we have to take the *long view*. Twenty centuries, it’s been now. Twenty centuries filled with war, and death, and hunger, and cruelty, and suffering, and pain, and so much more. And twenty centuries filled with good people, people with good hearts, people who do great acts of service, people who feed and clothe and do other things to help others less fortunate, people who inspire others to greatness, people who find solutions to at least *some* of the world’s problems, people who can look at a tragic situation and find reasons to hope.

People like Helena, who visited one of the world’s most sacred sites, that had been intentionally buried and obscured and desecrated for *two whole centuries*, and gave it *new life* from the ashes.

That’s what Christianity does. That’s what *God* does. That’s what *we* do. We look at the charred husk of a gorgeous 700-year-old cathedral, and realize that *this can be rebuilt*. We look at death, and remember that *Jesus is the resurrection and the life*. He has the power – the power to heal, the power to raise us from the dead. We look at an empty tomb, and say, “*He lives.*”

For Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*

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