

Preview of Coming Attractions: 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-19

Easter Sunrise Service: El Montecito Presbyterian Church

April 23, 2000

It has been twelve years since *Universal Studios* released the film directed by Martin Scorsese called *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Perhaps you saw it; perhaps you avoided it; perhaps you remember the loud protests from folks like Pat Buchanan, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson; the livid picketers parading their placards in front of theaters. One sign in Chicago summed things up nicely: “God doesn’t like this movie.” According to *The Last Temptation*, Jesus was a very troubled, confused figure, who stumbled through life with the help of a robust and stable confidante. . . Judas. When Jesus is crucified we watch as he drifts into unconsciousness, falls into a trance, and begins to dream about how things might have been, about what it would be like to get down from the cross, walk away from his calling, and embark on a normal peasant life—including marriage, children and old age.

Many Christians were scandalized to see Jesus dream of marrying Mary Magdalene and raising children with Mary and Martha. But for me, I’d have to say another sequence was even more arresting. At one point in his dream, we see Jesus, about 50 years old, happening upon the apostle Paul who is preaching to a handful of bystanders. The fact that Paul looks and acts like a cheap televangelist on late night T.V. is rather jarring, but the conversation that follows, between that Paul and Jesus, is simply remarkable. Allow me to recreate the scene.

Jesus I was never crucified. I never came back from the dead. I’m a man like everybody else. Why are you telling these lies? *I’m* the son of Mary and Joseph. I’m the one who preached in Galilee. I had followers. We marched on Jerusalem. Pilate condemned me, and God saved me.

Paul No he didn’t.

Jesus Don’t try and tell me what happened to me because I know. I live like a man now. I work, eat, have children. I enjoy my life. Do you understand what I am saying? So don’t go around telling lies about me, or I’ll tell everybody the truth.

Paul What’s the matter with you? Look around you. Look at all these people. Do you see how unhappy they are? Do you see how much they are suffering? Their only hope is the resurrected Jesus. I don’t care whether you’re Jesus or not. The resurrected Jesus will save the world and that’s what matters.

Jesus Those are lies. You can’t save the world by lying.

Paul I created the truth out of what people needed and what they believed. If I have to crucify you to save the world then I’ll crucify you. And if I have to resurrect you then I’ll do that too, whether you like it or not. You see, you don’t know how much people need God. You don’t know how happy he can make them. He can make them happy to do anything. He can make them happy to die and they’ll die. All for the sake of Christ. Jesus Christ. The Messiah. Not you. Not for your sake. You know I’m glad I met you, because now I can forget all about you. My Jesus is much more important and much more powerful.

Did you follow all that? According to Hollywood, we don’t *need* a real, historical Jesus. It doesn’t matter if the real body of Jesus *stayed in the grave* after all. Paul is perfectly content to carry on with a fictional Jesus--an imaginary, cardboard cut-out, fabricated to lift the spirits of the downtrodden masses. So what if the resurrection of Jesus didn’t happen? So what if it’s a myth, a story made up by the apostles. . . , like the Easter Bunny or Santa Claus, but for grownups? The early disciples fashioned a *tale*; they contrived a hoax, and lots of us fell for it.

Of course, the resurrection of Jesus has always provoked strong reactions. Back in the 1960s, you may remember that British author Hugh Schonfield created quite a stir with his book, *The Passover Plot*, which claimed to show that Jesus conspired with Joseph of Arimathea to fake his own death. According to Matthew's Gospel, someone ran and gave the dying Jesus a drink of sour wine. According to Schonfield, the guy offering the drink was in on Jesus' plot; he had already soaked the sponge with a powerful sedative, which is why Jesus didn't come to until Sunday morning. But that's when the plot unravelled. Greatly weakened from loss of blood, Jesus revived but only long enough to send an urgent message to his disciples. Then he collapsed and died.

More recently, a German New Testament scholar named Gerd Lüdemann has gone on record claiming that the resurrection was something that happened to the disciples, not to Jesus. I remember attending a lecture by Professor Lüdemann while studying at Duke University. Lüdemann is convinced that both Peter and Paul were delusional—they experienced self-induced visions of Jesus because both of them were wracked with guilt and deeply troubled—Peter for denying Jesus, and Paul for persecuting the early Christians. This inner turmoil was so intense that their minds created mental visions of the living Jesus. And not only did they hallucinate, but soon others were claiming “Jesus-sightings” as well. (Not to be confused with Elvis-sightings.)

So these are your Easter morning options. Either the disciples made it all up (*Last Temptation*), or Jesus faked his death (*Passover Plot*), or Peter and Paul were delusional psychotics (*Gerd Lüdemann*). As for me, I don't find myself persuaded by any of them. And St. Paul wouldn't like them either. I say this because we have Paul's own words on the subject, found in his first letter to the Corinthians, chp.15.

14: “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”

17: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

19: if Christ has not been raised, “we are of all people most to be pitied.”

In other words, Paul says, only a fool would pin his hopes on Jesus if the crucifixion was the end of the story. If Jesus' body stayed in the grave, anyone who devotes his life to the Christian cause is a pathetic loser. Think of Pastor Harold, Pastor Al, Pastor Mark. All losers. The three stooges. Unless. . . Unless Christ has been raised. Paul had absolutely no interest in slogging his way around the Mediterranean basin, picking his way through mountain passes and enduring the hardships of life on the road, if the resurrection of Jesus never happened. “Why put ourselves in danger every hour?” Paul asks (1 Cor 15:30).

The real resurrection of Jesus really matters. It changes everything. Let me leave you with four thoughts. *First*, if God raised Jesus from the dead, then we're forced to conclude that the cross was part of the plan. Wasn't this the punchline of Saint Peter's very first sermon? Jesus was “handed over to you, according to the definite plan . . . of God.” You crucified him, Peter said, “but God raised him up” (Acts 2:22-24). Wasn't this the stunning discovery that transformed Paul from persecutor into preacher? Without the resurrection, the cross is a tragedy—the untimely death of a popular rabbi who was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. But. . . if God raised Jesus from the dead, then what happened on Friday means something!

Second, if God raised Jesus from the dead—if Jesus came back to life physically, bodily, then *the body must be worth it* (Romans 8:11, 22-25). Why didn't God simply summon Jesus' spirit? Why bother raising up a dead body? The reason is clear: this *physical* universe is God's handiwork, God's passion, God's trophy. Plato taught that the *physical* human body was a prison cell from which we should seek liberation, but Plato was not a Christian. The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius spoke of each person as

“a little soul carrying a corpse,” (Med.4.4.1, citing Epictetus). But that’s because Marcus Aurelius was a *Stoic*, not a Christian. The body is not a temporary holding tank, or a necessary evil. The resurrection of Jesus means that God saw something worth saving in these “fragile bodies of touch and taste” (Bruce Cockburn).

Many of you will remember the tragic suicide in 1997 of 39 members of *Heaven’s Gate*, a group based here in California who believed that a UFO, travelling in the wake of comet Hale-Bopp, had come to take them to a higher level of existence. For those dear people, the human body was simply a *vehicle* or *tool* to be used while on earth and then discarded. So, when their time had come, they ingested massive doses of a sedative (mixed with applesauce, washed down with vodka), tied plastic bags over their heads, and laid down to die. But if God raised Jesus’ body from the dead, we can be sure that the body *is not* a worthless, disposable container. The resurrection of Jesus shows that this universe, and these bodies, are God’s treasure. That changes everything.

We can also be sure, thirdly, that if God raised Jesus from the dead, the future will resemble the past (1 Cor 15:20). Paul saw the resurrection of Jesus as a preview of coming attractions. If Jesus rose, so will we. And if Jesus didn’t rise, then Jesus’ followers have absolutely no hope of rising either. The future will be as dead as the past. Unless. . . Christ has been raised. If he has, then he is the “first fruits,” the proof that many more will one day be raised. The future resembles the past. And that changes everything.

This means, lastly, that if God raised Jesus from the dead, we can be sure that *death is not the last word* (1 Cor 15:26). I spent the summer of 1990 in the Philippines, living and working with the pastors of three poor but vibrant churches in Manila. I remember the Sunday afternoon that I climbed onto a little motorcycle, behind Pastor Chito. We wove our way through city traffic to a hospital, to visit a young mother who laying dying of kidney failure. Doctors had begun dialysis but her family ran out of money; she had only days to live. We found her in a large open ward, among scores of sickly patients, but all alone except for her young son who perched quietly on the end of her bed. We spoke with them—I only understood bits of the conversation—and then Pastor Chito asked me to pray. I don’t remember what I *said*, but I do remember how I *felt*. I remember hating sickness and death. I remember my tears as I thought of that young boy without his mom. Death. . . is the enemy, isn’t it? Death isn’t glamorous. It shows no mercy, offers no comfort. And yet, if God raised Jesus from the dead, Paul says, the day will come when death itself will be swallowed up in victory (v.54). Easter is proof that death will not get the last word, that death will one day meet its match. And that changes everything.

Perhaps you didn’t know, when you climbed out of bed this morning, that you were climbing down into the heat of a debate—about the cross, about the body, about the future, about death. But you were. And here we are. By gathering we proclaim our belief that Jesus *really did* return from the grave. We’re not here because it is springtime; not here to smell the flowers; we didn’t come simply to delight in a well-told fairytale. We gather this morning because we believe that at least once in human history the unthinkable happened. We celebrate the day time worked backward; the day death released its victim and somebody came back to life. And may I add: if it happened once, it can happen *again*.