

Reasons To Believe

Luke 24:1-12

Easter Sunday

4th April 2010

Amid this past week's news headlines about terrorist attacks in Moscow, higher than average spring temperatures in Ontario and the continuing furore surrounding Helen Guergis, there was another story that caught my eye. A story of retribution.

It seems that down in Ohio a truck driver left for work in a bit of a hurry. Later in the morning, he realised that he had forgotten his lunch, so decided to stop by his house during a delivery and pick it up. As he approached the house, the truck driver noticed a top-of-the-line SUV parked in the driveway. Curious, because he didn't own one and had never seen the vehicle before, he entered by the back door to see who the visitor was. As he approached the living room, he heard voices and stopped to listen. He couldn't hear what was being said but realised his wife was talking with a man whose voice he didn't recognise.

Furious, the driver left the house and walked to his truck which happened to be a ready-mix concrete truck. Then he simply backed the truck up to the SUV and, poking the chute through an open window, filled the car with wet cement. He called his office on his cell phone, confessed, and offered to pay for the concrete. Amid uproarious laughter, he was told that load was on the company!

Later that day, the man returned home still full of righteous anger but only to find his wife in tears. It turned out that she was going to surprise him with the gift of the new SUV to celebrate their forthcoming wedding anniversary. The male voice he had heard in the living room was the local car dealer who had delivered the vehicle and was simply finalising the paperwork.¹

Can you believe that? Well, I hope not. Because, it's not true. It sounds good but it never happened. This story has actually been circulating for some time in tabloid newspapers and latterly through email, Facebook and Twitter. It's what's called an urban legend, a popular myth, one of the countless stories that have a small kernel of truth but are really fictitious. Such stories sound so good and people so desperately want them to be true that they pass them on as such. You remember the story of the child kidnapped in Toys 'R Us whose hair was dyed? Or the email chain letter claiming that the UK had banned teaching of the Holocaust in schools for fear of offending Muslims?

Urban legends come in different forms. Some develop incrementally over the years from otherwise unremarkable and innocent events. People's imaginations

latch on to them, adding their own details, filling in the blanks and, if necessary, "lending artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative."² Then these stories get passed on, with the assurance that they are based on hard and fast, incontestable truth, heard from a reliable source. As such, these stories evolve, taking on a life of their own, until finally – like World War I trench whispers – they bear no semblance whatsoever to the original. In this form, the urban myth is a collective and communal creation that grows and develops with little direction or intentionality.

But such myths can also be intentionally started and transmitted down through the years. Usually, in this form, the story starts with one person and is communicated and circulated, with little or no change to the original, remaining remarkably the same over the years.

One of the greatest urban myths or hoaxes of this type relates to an archaeological find back in the early 1900s when fragments of a skull or jawbone were discovered in the Sussex village of Uckfield in England. Though some were sceptical, the fragments were believed by many contemporary experts – including geologists and biologists from the British museum – to be the fossilised remains of a heretofore undiscovered hominid which, because it had both human and ape-like features, provided the answer to the famous "missing link" between the two species. The Piltdown Man, as this early human came to be called, was extremely convincing in an era which was intrigued by the burgeoning science of Evolution. It was something that huge numbers of people of the day greatly wanted to be true. So much so that it became one of the longest running paleontological hoaxes of all times, lasting for over 40 years before the deception was exposed and the remains were finally shown to be nothing other than the skull of a man combined with the jaw of an orang-utan. The origin of the perpetrator of this hoax has never been revealed but names of such famous people as Arthur Conan Doyle have been mentioned as distinct possibilities.

I wonder if it's possible that the Resurrection itself could be an urban myth or a hoax. Could it be that this story of a man from Nazareth who died and rose again is nothing more than fiction? A story that people wanted so much to be true and passed it on as such?

Well, it's an interesting theory. But, really, there are so many persuasive arguments regarding the truth of the Resurrection that the possibility of it being a hoax would take quite a stretch of the imagination.

One particularly convincing argument of its

authenticity is that the events surrounding the story of the Resurrection resonate with reality.

Folklore expert, Jan Harold Brunvand, says one distinct clue to the false nature of many urban legends is that they are literally too good to be true. Too neatly plotted to be believed. Too coincidental to be taken seriously. Reports of actual events are not usually that neat and tidy but are filled with various discrepancies.³

Just look, for instance, at the inconsistencies in what the Gospel writers tell us happened on that first Easter morning. For instance, one says Mary Magdalene went alone to the tomb while others say she was accompanied by the mother of James or Salome. Mark says that the sun had risen while John says that it was still dark. Matthew says that an angel came and rolled the stone away but Luke says there were two men in dazzling clothes whereas John says there were two angels dressed in white. Luke says that Peter went alone to the tomb whereas John's Gospel says it was both Peter and John but Matthew and Mark, for their part, don't mention any of the men going to the tomb. In Mark's account, the reaction by Jesus' followers to his resurrection is fear and distress but in the other gospels the empty tomb is greeted with amazement and joy.⁴

Now, if Dr. Brunvand is to be believed, these anomalies – far from being evidence of weakness in the veracity of the resurrection accounts – would actually strengthen the credibility of the Resurrection story. Just like witnesses in a court case who are more believable when there are variations in their testimony rather than their accounts being carbon copies of one other.

So the fact that the events surrounding the Resurrection resonate with reality is a good pointer to their authenticity.

But perhaps the most persuasive argument for the reality of the Resurrection is in the person of Jesus himself. In his trustworthiness. That he was true to his word. That he said before he died that he would return – and he did. That he undertook to be with us till the end of the world and he has done what he said. He has kept his promise. The promise of his presence. The promise of his loving care. He said he would not leave his followers alone but would come back to be with them and take care of them.

The Rev. Robert L. Allan tells of an Easter pageant that took place in the town where he ministered. No-one was too concerned about casting. A nun was to play Mary Magdalene, a teacher to be Peter, a banker to be Judas. But there were some rumblings when it was announced that a local fellow, a big, burly oil-field worker was the unlikely choice to play Jesus. How, people wondered, could someone who cursed like a trooper and had a reputation for bar-room brawls be cast as the most perfect and purest man that ever lived?

“The day of the Easter pageant arrived,” says Allan,

“and thousands of people gathered on the hillside to watch the dramatic re-enactment of the last week in the life of Jesus. When they came to that part of the play where Jesus was taken to be crucified, a little man who was filling in as an extra as a part of the crowd, became caught up in the emotion of the event and joined in on the shouts of ‘Crucify!’ ... ‘Crucify!’ ... ‘Crucify!’ As Jesus was being led away toward Calvary, carrying the Cross on his back, he walked past this little man in the crowd, who was still caught up in the emotion of the moment, shouting insults at the top of his voice. Just as the character playing Jesus walked by, this little man spat in his face. The big, burly man stopped in his tracks. He reached up and wiped his face dry, looked at this little man, and, with words that were truer than he could have imagined, he said, ‘I’ll be back to take care of you after the Resurrection!’”⁵

Well, Robert Allan says the oil worker Jesus' words were so unintentionally true that those who heard them couldn't resist a quiet laugh. Allan never found out whether the oil-worker was true to his word. But Jesus certainly was, he says. He promised to come back and take care of those who believed in him and he certainly has done so. Countless millions down through the ages and around the world today will gladly testify to the fact that they have experienced, and continue to experience, his risen presence. A presence that is a constant source of help and support. A presence that gives people courage to fight when the odds are stacked against them. A presence that strengthens people to keep on “keeping on” when they feel like giving up. A presence that turns despair into a new feeling of expectancy. A presence that turns sorrow into joy. A presence that gives people the hope in the most hopeless of situations.

“I’ll be back to take care of you after the Resurrection.” Test out that promise and you’ll find it’s no legend, no myth, no hoax. Rather, you’ll discover the age-old truth of Christ’s presence in the world today and, especially, in your world. A presence that will transform your life dramatically in exciting and unimaginable ways.

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¹ Adapted from a story on www.urbanlegendsonline.com

² W.S. Gilbert, *The Mikado*, 1895

³ Adapted from Jan Harold Brunvand, *Too Good To Be True-The Colossal Book of Urban Legends*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1999, p.294

⁴ Mark 16:1-8; Matthew 28:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1- 8

⁵ Robert L. Allan, “The Easter Event – After The Resurrection”, *Greatest Passages Of The Bible*, CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1990