

“LIFE AFTER JESUS”

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

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I sometimes hear church people say, “I’m glad Easter is over. It is hard work.” But in many ways the work now begins. Now that our preparation of Lent is over, now that the hustle and bustle and excitement of Easter is over, I ask myself, “How do I follow after Jesus?” “Where can I find the source of abundant life?”

In searching for answers, I found it helpful to take a look back at what happened both to Jesus and to his disciples. First, the story. What happened.

John Dominic Crossan once asked his students in a general education class at DePaul University to write out their own memory of the passion story. He told them that it was an experiment and that he would explain more fully once they had completed the experiment. They were promised five final-grade points no matter what they wrote out but were asked to guarantee in writing that they would not ask anyone for help and that they would not seek help from any biblical sources. Here is the paper that one of his students returned:

“Even though I have been educated in a Catholic Grammar School, High School, and now College, I can honestly say I do not remember much. I will though try to recall the Arrest, Trial, Execution, and Burial of Jesus in as much detail as possible.

What I do remember about the Arrest of Jesus is that Judas betrayed Jesus. Judas was one of Jesus’ disciples and betrayed him anyway. He came to a town one day where Jesus was preaching and healing people and arrested him in front of the whole crowd. Judas and some men captured Jesus and took him away to what is known as the trial.

The Trial of Jesus was quite short from what I remember. They took Jesus into a room and questioned him about his identity. Some priest asked Jesus if he really was the Son of God, and Jesus replied ‘yes’ and that did it. The crowd was shouting ‘crucify him,’ they thought he was an imposter. Their decision was to kill him which lead to the Execution of Jesus.

I remember the Execution of Jesus as being very sad. I was taught that Jesus was stripped of his clothes, and hung on a cross with nails pounded through his hands and his feet. Also, they placed a crown of thorns on his head and beat him. I do not remember who tortured him, but I do remember that he was horribly abused. They did this in order to see if God would rescue his Son.

One of Jesus’ disciples had him buried in a tomb. The people in the town had guards watching the tomb, because Jesus proclaimed that he would rise from the dead. Sure enough he did rise from the dead and the whole town was shaken up. Not many believed he was the Son of God, until now. (A, p. 57-58)”

But we do have better sources than this student's memory. .

In recent years, parts of Jesus' life and the actions of the early Jewish-Christian group have been found outside of the Bible. Here are two accounts from the first century Roman historian Tacitus.

"Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for the moment only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue." (A, p. 9)

In another reference from Tacitus:

"About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man...For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks.... When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him....and the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared." (A, p. 12)

One thing that strikes me about these references is that they both refer to a movement that Jesus started. They both mention Jesus' execution. And they both point out that the movement continued and expanded even after his execution. However, it strikes me as odd that in Jesus' time the people were used to hearing stories about miraculous healing, people appearing after they had died, gods taking on physical form and interacting with humans.

Take, for example, this story about the conception of Octavius, the person who became Caesar Augustus:

"When Atia had come in the middle of the night to the solemn service of Apollo, she had her litter set down in the temple and fell asleep, while the rest of the matrons also slept. On a sudden a serpent glided up to her and shortly went away....at once there appeared on her body a mark in colors like a serpent, and she could never get rid of it; so that presently she ceased ever to go to the public baths. In the tenth month after that Augustus was born and was therefore regarded as the son of Apollo." (A, p. 28)

Maybe she was embarrassed by her first snake tattoo.

Not only did Augustus claim to have been born of a human woman and the god Apollo and from then on, the Caesars claimed to be Lord, Son of God, and Savior. Their titles were stamped into the coins the Romans used.

The people who lived in the first century Judea had two different models for what Lord and God were

like. But something happened to the Disciples after Easter, and it changed their lives. It turned them from a fearful group into the leaders of a movement for which they were willing to die for. In Acts, we read about how Peter refuses to back down from teaching about Jesus even when he is brought before a board of inquiry who had ordered him not to.

In today's gospel lesson from John this transformation of the apostles is also captured. When Jesus tells Thomas that he can touch the wounds on Jesus' body Thomas proclaims, "My Lord and my God." The reading says that the disciples rejoiced. I wonder if they thought, "Okay, Jesus is back, we have the Holy Spirit, we have the power to forgive sins, now we need to form a committee to figure out what to do next."

I don't know what was going on in Thomas' mind when he realized that Jesus was his Lord and God, but I know I would not call someone "my Lord and God" unless that person were able to deliver on their promises. I would want someone that I could count on when the going gets rough.

I read something that asks for the same types of reassurances that I would ask of my Lord and my God. Here's what it said:

"What if we knew for certain that everything we're worried about today will work out fine?

What if...we had a guarantee that the problem bothering us would be worked out in the most perfect way, and at the best possible time? Furthermore, what if we knew that three years from now we'd be grateful for that problem, and the solution? What if...we knew that even our worst fear would work out for the best? What if...we had a guarantee that everything that's happening, and has happened, in our life was meant to be, planned just for us, and in our best interest? What if...we had a guarantee that everything that the people we love are experiencing exactly what they need in order to become who they're intended to become? Furthermore, what if we had a guarantee that others can be responsible for themselves, and we don't have to control or take responsibility for them? What if...we knew the future was going to be good, and we would have an abundance of resources and guidance to handle whatever comes our way? What if...we knew everything was okay, and we didn't have to worry about a thing?" (B, p. 81-82)

Who can deliver these promises? Can Augustus, a Roman emperor backed by fabulous colonial wealth and massive military power? There are plenty of emperors who want us to believe that the only security for us is through colonial wealth and massive military power. But I have found that their promises just enslave.

Or, do we find life in Jesus, a Jewish peasant child poor enough to be born in somebody else's stable? Who lived denying the power of Caesar and affirming the presence of the Kingdom of God. Do we follow the One who taught that love and justice are the foundation of life and not the coercive power of Caesar? Do we follow after Jesus even though Caesar tried to silence his message by executing him as a revolutionary?

The choice is ours. Who is our Lord and our God? Choose. May we make the right choice. Amen.

References:

- A) The Birth of Christianity, by John Dominic Crossan
- B) The Meaning of Letting Go, by Melody Beattie