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Recommended Citation

Talbot, Louis T., "Christ Lives!" (1933). *Biola Radio Publications*. 11.
<https://digitalcommons.biola.edu/biola-radio-pubs/11>

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CHRIST LIVES!

LOUIS T. TALBOT





Christ Lives!

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BIBLE INSTITUTE HOUR
Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Inc.
P O. Box 151, Los Angeles, Calif.

CHRIST LIVES!

"Because I live, ye shall live also" John 14:19.

The greatest single event in human history, displaying at once the most tremendous force and exerting the most powerful influence upon the entire world, was not a mighty military victory. It was not an amazing achievement of the arts. It was not an ingenious invention of man. It was not a stupendous scientific discovery—not even the development of the atom bomb of our day. Honest research into history results in but one conclusion: the world-shaking and world-shaping occurrence of all time was the resurrection from the dead of our Lord Jesus Christ in the land of Palestine, nearly two thousand years ago.

Since that time, no phase of life upon the earth in any age has been unaffected by the fact that Christ rose again. Wherever the tidings of this event have reached, they have altered the living and thinking of "nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues." Every "good and perfect gift" of civilization is but a by-product of the Gospel of a living Lord. Emancipation from every form of tyranny, the "four freedoms," and all freedoms, had their origin in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The world may "little note, nor long remember" what He did when He offered up His life a ransom for sinners at the "place of a skull," and when on that first Easter morn, He shook off the shackles of death in His borrowed tomb, but it will to the time of the end feel the effects of what He accomplished. Whether or not one believes in its reality, the resurrection of Christ is of vital consequence to every person on earth. It is the "touchstone of destiny" for all mankind.

But while it is of interest to consider the meaning of the resurrection to the world at large, those of us who believe are more concerned about what the fact that Christ lives signifies to

The Church

The true church, the "called out ones," compose the body, the bride, the beloved of the Lord Jesus Christ. She is His chief heart interest, not only because, at the fearful price of His own poured-out blood and broken body, He purchased her salvation, but because she is the sole repository and dispenser of His Gospel in this world. Upon her, filled with the Holy Spirit, rests His hope of reaching sinners with the message that by His death and resurrection the Father has been reconciled to them. The church remains on earth for the specific purpose of beseeching men to be reconciled to God.

No wonder, then, that the Lord surrounded the fact of the resurrection, "the keystone to the arch of the Gospel," with incontrovertible evidence. All of the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord depended upon the historic validity of His rising from the dead. His resurrection was the seal of all of His redemptive work and the guarantee of His salvation to everyone who would accept it by faith.

Paul stated it clearly: "If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain. . . . And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable."

It is an astonishing fact to contemplate that when Jesus died, no one, so far as we can judge from the scriptural records, believed in His resurrection. His disciples had seen Him demonstrate His mastery over death three times, when He brought to life the twelve-year-old

maiden, the young man of Nain, and His personal friend, Lazarus. They had heard His plain assertion: "I am the resurrection and the life." They had been told by Him again and again that "the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." They remembered it all vividly enough after He rose from the dead, but on the day of His burial not one of them had confidence in Him that He would return to life.

On the eve of His crucifixion, "Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad." What a scattering of the sheep there was, when they all forsook Him and fled! For their faith too had fled. The darkness that covered the land for the three hours that Jesus hung upon the cross was no blacker than the despair which fell upon the spirits of the disciples when Jesus was laid in Joseph's new rock-hewn tomb. The two disciples on the Emmaus road but expressed the hopeless cry of the entire group: "But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel."

Yes, the evidence of Christ's resurrection had to be unmistakable, not only to convince an incredulous, hostile world, but to confirm the faith and restore the confidence of the bewildered little flock. The Lord was well aware that if this band of weak men and women were to carry His Gospel to the ends of the earth, if they were to invade Satan's strongholds and storm the very gates of hell, they would have to be possessed of, and obsessed with, an unshakable faith in His resurrection. That He was alive was the final, undeniable proof that He was God, and not man. His children were not to "follow cunningly devised fables" but to rely upon genuine facts, incidents that actually

occurred. For this reason the Lord saw to it that the resurrection was the best attested fact in the evangelical record. It became for the church "the Gibraltar of Christian faith and the Waterloo of infidelity."

Consider the circumstantial evidence of that first Easter: the empty tomb; the orderly grave clothes; the broken Roman seal; the disrupted stone; the fearful earthquake; the angel visitants; the terrified guards; the frightened women; the dumbfounded disciples, and the manifest lies of the enemies of Christ who gave "large money unto the soldiers" to publish the fiction that His disciples had made away with His body.

But that was by no means all. "He showed Himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God." Although Jesus was naturally eager to get back Home to His Father, there was so much for Him to do in assuring His children that He was indeed alive—very God of very God—that He was actually delayed on earth forty days! He made seventeen personal appearances, before and after His ascension, to various persons individually, and in groups. "He was seen of above five hundred brethren at once." In so short a treatise we cannot even list the numerous details which substantiated His resurrection.

Yes, God multiplied the evidence, and thank God, the church at last believed it and after Pentecost went forth ecstatically to proclaim it in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Book of Acts, and the entire missionary enterprise from that time until the present hour, were the results. The resurrection of Christ is the central message and the motive power of the church.

One of the strongest arguments in favor of the literal resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is the continuance

to this very day of that belief against all opposition and persecution. It has been the most persistent of doctrines. Men were burned at the stake, singing of a living Christ through the flames; frail women were thrown to ravenous beasts, affirming that Jesus was alive. It is not surprising that "their sound went into all the earth and their words unto the ends of the world."

This is the heritage of the church today. We preach not a defeated Jesus, still hanging upon a cross of sin and shame.

*"The head that once was crowned with thorns
Is crowned in glory now;
A royal diadem adorns
The mighty Victor's brow."*

We have a risen Saviour! Because He lives, we live also. Because He lives, we are "stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as [we] know that [our] labour is not in vain in the Lord." Because He lives, we "can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth [us]." Because He lives, "we are more than conquerors through him that loved us."

Now the church militant, we suffer, we toil, we sacrifice, "as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things." Soon we shall be the church triumphant, in the presence of our living Lord, "a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing." And we owe it all to the fact that Jesus not only died for us, but that He also rose again "for our justification"!

But what of the individuals to whom Jesus made personal appearances after His resurrection? We are inter-

ested in knowing what the fact that Jesus was alive meant to

Mary of Magdala

How like the grace of God it was that Christ should have made His first post-resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene! Tender and touching is the tale of His dealings with her. While it cannot be definitely proven that she was "the sinful woman" of Luke's Gospel, there is no question but that she had been a great sinner. Evermore she bore the designation, "Mary Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils." The "seven" would indicate the lowest depths of human depravity. Apparently she had drunk the vile cup of iniquity to the dregs. The very name of her hometown, Magdala, was synonymous with every heinous sin, and history records that its wickedness finally destroyed it.

Whether or not Mary became acquainted with Jesus at Simon's feast, it is certain that somewhere along her life's way she encountered Him and heard His call to sinners: "Come unto me, all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Ever afterwards she gave evidence that she "loved much." And why should she not love Christ? He was the only One whose love had not done her harm and the first really worthy Object that ever claimed her worship and affection. He saved her soul, forgave her sins, gave her a new life, and she yielded her heart to Him in complete devotion. As she had gone all the way in sin, so she went all the way with her Lord when she was redeemed.

Imagine, then, Mary's agony over the suffering and death of Jesus. One of the last to leave the scene of horror, she had lingered until Joseph took charge of the body of the Lord, and Nicodemus appeared with his hun-

dred-weight of myrrh and aloes. With a heart breaking under the weight of her woe, Mary hastened home to prepare additional spices that she and the other women might perform the last sad ministrations for Christ. Her faith had suffered a staggering blow. She had believed Jesus to be God, for who but God could have forgiven her sin and changed her life? But could God lie silent and dead, wrapped in the garments of the grave? Restlessly, she hurried back to the tomb while it was still dark. Perhaps a faint hope stirred within her heart that Jesus might do something about His own death as He had done about that of Lazarus, who had been dead far longer than He.

Mary "seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre, Then she runneth and cometh to Simon Peter, and the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre and we know not where they have laid him." When John and Peter heard these tidings, they started off immediately for the tomb and quite likely Mary followed them, for she was there after they returned to their homes.

"But Mary stood without the sepulchre weeping." She wept for the agony of her Lord upon the cross; she wept for the cruel end of such a blessed, holy life; she wept for her own hopelessness and bereavement. Surely the end had come for her and for all of the world He had come to redeem. There was no one to whom to go: He only had the words of eternal life; He only could "bind up the broken-hearted." Her Lord was irretrievably gone, and the waves of doubt and sorrow rolled over her and engulfed her soul. Of course, her grief was wrong, because it was the result of unbelief, but that did not make her less pitiable.

But suddenly, in a moment, Mary's mourning was turned into an ecstasy of gladness! Through tear-wet

eyes she beheld Jesus, alive! Revealed to her in the mention of her name, since "never man spake like this man," in an instant, her faith in Him as her God was restored, and her burden of sorrow was lifted. She knew it was He because again He met the need of her heart. It was not alone His familiar outward appearance and the tone of His voice when He called her "Mary," but it was because He was aware of her spiritual difficulty, and took care of it at once. Bidding her not to delay Him by clinging to Him since He was already on His way to the Father, He gave her a commission, "Go and tell," and Mary went singing on her way, a happy, triumphant witness of the resurrection! We turn from this joyous scene to another eye-witness,

Thomas the Twin

In the make-up of his personality, Thomas Didymus (the twin) was the complete antithesis to impulsive, affectionate Mary of Magdala. His was a thoughtful, inquiring mind. He was the calculating type that wanted to be certain of everything. He did not jump at conclusions; cautious and deliberate, he seldom made mistakes in judgment. Lack of courage was not his weakness, for when Jesus was about to walk into the jaws of death by returning to Judea to raise Lazarus, it was he who proposed: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." He may not have doubted any more than the others, but because he was so outspoken about it, the record stands against him. They were all guilty of not believing Christ when He stated that He would die and after three days rise again. If they heard Him at all, they must have believed that He was using some theological figure of speech. So obsessed were they with the popular Judaistic Messianic view of a glorious kingdom to be restored to Israel that

they gave no credence at all to His references concerning His passion.

The incredulity of Thomas was reprehensible, and not to be passed over lightly. Jesus had once told the Jews, "If ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins." While God has patience with an honest inquirer, unbelief has no virtue in His eyes. Contrary to the popular atheistic view of our day, skepticism is not an indication of intellectuality, either.

The risen Christ was cognizant of the difficulty of Thomas, of the awful doubt that was shaking his soul, of the violent struggle that was taking place in his heart. "He knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man." Because He was God, He was aware too of those unbelieving words Thomas had spoken so hastily, in the bitterness of his soul, when he believed that all was lost at the crucifixion: "Except I shall see . . . I will not believe."

It is amazing that when eight days later Jesus appeared personally to Thomas, He did not reprove him for his doubts. He had compassion upon him for He knew how sick at heart Thomas was and He dealt with him as kindly as He had with poor, sorrowing Mary.

"Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands, and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side, and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered, My Lord and my God."

Did Thomas touch the wounds of Jesus for proof? Certainly not! The fact that Christ understood his need was enough for "Doubting Thomas," who from that instant became "Believing Thomas." Not only was he transformed into a bright and shining witness for the resurrection, but after the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, he became a flaming evangel. His-

tory records that he gave a good account of himself as a missionary to distant Parthia.

Christ lives! And He is interested in the soul trouble of those who, like Thomas, find it hard to believe in the supernatural. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. . . . If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine."

Thus Mary of Magdala became a witness of the resurrection, and so did Thomas the Twin,

"And Peter"

All of us have a fellow feeling for Peter, because in so many ways he resembles most of us. Constructed of the same imperfect material, he was so rash; he made so many mistakes; he talked so much; he so often failed at critical times. But withal he was an interesting and lovable character, irresistible and irrepressible.

It amazes us to note the reaction of Christ to Peter upon their first encounter: "And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon, the son of Jona; thou shalt be called Cephas . . . a stone." In the three years that Peter followed Jesus as His disciple, very infrequent were the indications of any rock-like substance in his character. There was a brief glimpse of it when he made the Great Confession: "We believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God." But on the whole his performance was definitely disappointing and not up to Jesus' estimate of him. But that was before the resurrection!

Peter was a much more direct personality than Thomas; he was an extrovert in every respect, a man of action rather than a man of thought. He was not held back by inhibitions, cursed by an inferiority complex, or

tortured by a skeptical mind. His was a battle with a dispositional weakness which he attempted to conceal by bluster and bravado: he was a craven coward. No one was better aware of it than he, unless it was his Lord. But Jesus also knew a wonderful secret about Peter: He held the key that could unlock Peter's personality. He holds such a key for the hearts of all of His children!

After the crucifixion, Peter was in deeper soul trouble than even Mary and Thomas. Not only overwhelmed with the awful sense of loss that Mary felt, not only filled with a bitter doubt, as was Thomas, but on top of these experiences of sorrow and unbelief, he was suffering from a gnawing conviction of sin. No man ever hated himself more than did Peter after the death of Jesus. He remembered with agony his egotistical boasting that he would never forsake Jesus, he who not only deserted with all of the others, leaving Jesus to His enemies in His hour of need, but who "denied with an oath, I do not know the man"!

All four of the Gospel writers tell the shameful story of Peter's treachery; apparently the Holy Spirit wanted us to know how far the best of men may fall, and how high the worst of men may be lifted by His grace. The heinous sin of Judas seems no worse than Peter's, the only difference being that Peter repented while Judas did away with himself, thus shutting the door himself to God's mercy. Jesus, when a prisoner in the house of the high priest before His trial, "turned and looked upon Peter . . . and Peter went out and wept bitterly." What was in that look only Christ and Peter knew, for He deals personally and privately with the need of every heart. For the first time in his life, Peter saw himself as he really was, and he felt that he no longer had any claim upon the love and mercy of Christ.

No wonder the angel in the empty tomb declared to Mary of Magdala and the other women: "He is risen; He is not here . . . go your way, tell his disciples and Peter." Can it be that Peter, because of his shameful conduct, no longer even claimed to be a disciple? His faith had been crushed and he had sunk into the depths of despair and self-incrimination. If he had only remembered the promise of Jesus to him, he would not have known such utter defeat. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not."

So Jesus arranged to be "seen of Cephas" in person after His resurrection. His initial appearance to him with the ten disciples apparently did not accomplish what the Lord wished, nor did the visit to the eleven when He dealt with Thomas. The third appearance to the seven at the Sea of Galilee was for the obvious purpose of restoring His erring Peter. Since Peter had denied Him thrice, three times Jesus put to him that burning, heart-searching question: "Lovest thou me?" He had to separate Peter forever from his old occupation of fishing which he now probably felt was the only thing he was fit for; He had to draw out of his heart the love of which he was capable. He uncovered the rock. Did Peter believe in the resurrection after this experience? He did, because it was the living Christ who remade his vessel which had been broken upon the wheel of sin. His sin freely forgiven, restored to his place of leadership among the disciples, Peter became one of the greatest preachers of the resurrection ever known on earth.

Hear him on the day of Pentecost: "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: whom God hath raised up." Listen to him in

Solomon's porch: "The God of our fathers hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up. . . . And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses." A prisoner of the Jews, in the presence of Annas and Caiaphas, he declared boldly: "By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole."

Peter never stopped preaching the resurrection until the day the enemies of Christ crucified him, head down, a martyr for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake.

Our hearts thrill as we recall these post-resurrection personal appearances of Jesus which brought such a change to the lives of Mary, Thomas, Peter, and many others that space does not allow us to mention. Paul, for instance, "a man born out of due time," whose meeting with the risen Christ on the Damascus road changed him from a hater to a lover of the Saviour, and transformed him into the greatest missionary this world ever knew. We could follow a great cloud of witnesses down to our day who, although they did not see Jesus bodily, believed and died for the truth of the resurrection. But the most important thing of all to us is not what the fact that Christ lives meant to them but what it signifies to

You and Me

Does it mean to us, as it did to Mary, that "the bitter grief which no one understands" has been removed from our hearts; that our Thomas-like doubts are gone; that our personal sin question, like Peter's, has been solved? Has the risen Christ met our own personal needs? If not, then there can be no Easter in our hearts, however fragrant the lilies, and however melodious the hymns of praise. There is no real knowledge at all except experimental

knowledge. So what we hear and read and learn about the risen Christ may thrill us, but it is our own personal experiences with Him that will change us.

Are we of this day defrauded because we have not seen Jesus in person? Not at all. Since we have made our appearance so far along the stream of time, of necessity we are forced into the group of those who must believe without seeing. And Jesus says of us, if we accept these things by faith: "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." We thus have the advantage over the eyewitnesses. In addition, there is something glorious ahead for us: that is sight. Faith does very well for the present time, but what will it be like to see Jesus and be with Him?

*"Jesus the very thought of thee
With sweetness fills the breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see
And in Thy presence rest."*

If you are a Christian, think a moment about your own conversion. When you received Jesus as your Saviour, was it because of these infallible proofs of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in Palestine? I dare say it was not. You were bearing a load of sin and sorrow in your heart; you heard the Gospel; you came to Jesus, and He lifted your burden. You believed, not because of outward evidences, but because He met your interior need. Afterwards, it was a joy to have the truth corroborated, and to know that there was a definite basis of fact for "the things most surely believed among us." Have you a need today in your Christian life? Remember Christ lives and He can supply it. Trust Him and you will not be disappointed. Christ is experienced in dealing with human hearts. Let Him satisfy the deepest longing of your soul.

And to you, my unsaved friend, the resurrection should mean that there is an all-sufficient Saviour, an almighty living Lord, in Jesus Christ, whom you may know if you will. "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." It is necessary for the salvation of your immortal soul to accept the fact that Christ lives. If He does not live, He is not God, and if He is not God, there is no hope for anyone in earth or heaven. But He is God and He is alive! And millions of true believers throughout the ages have witnessed to that fact because He met their personal needs. Will you prove to yourself today that Jesus is alive by letting Him supply the need of your heart and life, by allowing Him to become your Lord and your God? Then you may join with all believers in the song of Easter:

*"He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and talks with me along
life's narrow way.
He lives, He lives, salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives? He
lives within my heart."**

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