

Did you know there really is a connection between one of our early governors of New Mexico and the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter? Lew Wallace, the governor of the New Mexico territory, 1878-1881, was also a Union general during the American Civil War and he commanded a brigade at the battle of Shiloh. The battle at Shiloh was one of the bloodiest & deadliest of the war, and the suffering and casualties were so terrible and inhumane that he began to doubt the whole idea of God and religion. Wallace had been indifferent toward faith, but after the war, he became increasingly cynical, skeptical and doubtful, and even embittered against Christianity and the Church. For the next several years, he read and studied extensively and did research in leading libraries of Europe and America, learning about the earliest Christian Church, so that he could refute and disprove the reliability and truthfulness of the Bible. He planned to use his research in a book which would, as he put it, “forever destroy the myth of Christianity, a religion of superstition based on the lie of a resurrection.”

By examining the claims of Scripture for truthfulness, he expected to expose Christianity and faith as a fraud. But as he delved into all the available historical evidence, and learned more about the early Christian Church, so that he could refute and disprove any claims that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead... **he became convinced that it was all true, and that Jesus Christ truly is the risen Son of God.** He discovered there were no **more-reasonable or better-explanations** for the remarkable changes in Peter and the other apostles, and their commitment even to the point of martyrdom, or for the spread of Christianity despite severe persecution, * **other than Jesus having been raised from the dead.** It was through all of his scholarship and research that Lew Wallace was converted to a new perspective **of faith, and that he wrote a very different sort of book than what he had originally planned and intended.** His book had become a novel about early Christianity and the struggles of a doubting cynic coming to faith, and as it turns out, he wrote the final chapters while he was serving as the territory governor in Santa Fe. When *Ben-Hur* was published, it became an immediate best seller. In the preface of the book he wrote, he described the process of his coming to faith: “the act of writing *Ben-Hur* resulted in a conviction amounting to absolute belief in God and the divinity of Christ.”

That sort of journey, **from cynic and skeptic to believer in Christ**, such as Lew Wallace’s, is not all that unusual or unique. Many who have seriously investigated the claims of faith intending to refute and disprove the resurrection of Christ, have along the way been turned and have come to faith, once they had seriously considered all the evidence. Actually for most people, **an authentic and committed faith**, often includes some period of doubt, questioning & exploration... which is the same process described by Luke’s Easter story. It begins on that terrible Good Friday before the Jewish Sabbath, when the women had watched in stricken shock and horror as they saw Jesus being tortured and then die on the cross... and then looking on as his mangled corpse was laid in a tomb, then sealed by a huge stone to block access to the grave. They had come to the tomb early on the first Easter morning not for a resurrection or anticipating anything other than pouring the spices they prepared **over his decaying dead body as a final act of their love and devotion**

vs. 1-7

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. **Remember** how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

They came, not expecting the stone to be already rolled away. They came, not expecting for the tomb to be empty. They came, not expecting to see and hear messengers from God **who would ask them to remember what Jesus had said to them.** Several times during his ministry, Jesus had announced that he

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would be killed in Jerusalem, but the rise on the 3rd day. **** This passage we read is really about remembering.** The women did not expect to find signs of life at the tomb, but, as the two men remind them they would have expected it **if they had remembered what Jesus told them.** And then, when the women rushed off to tell the apostles about it, **they too didn't remember**, but reacted with confusion and doubt, and even dismissed their words as just an "idle tale". And when Peter ran and saw the empty tomb for himself, **not remembering**, he wasn't understanding, he wasn't convinced, but walked away confused, amazed and mystified. **Peter didn't remember and couldn't figure out what had happened.** In the all four gospels and in all of the Apostle Paul's letters, the focus is not on the empty tomb, but it's the impact of the living Christ on the disciples. A good answer to cynics and skeptics, is how the early church held-fast and proclaimed their faith through all persecution, even preferring to suffer and die in agony as martyrs, rather than deny the resurrection of Jesus.

Clearly they were convinced and committed to proclaim that God had indeed raised Jesus from the dead, as he said. In the Bible, neither the gospel writers nor in Paul's letters, no one ever tries to explain how the resurrection happened, but rather, they all focused on their relationship with **the risen Christ... and on how we, as growing and faithful Christians, can experience our risen Lord daily, in the here and now.** Easter is not about just an empty tomb, but a personal encounter with the risen Lord that **leads to faith.** I am convinced that an authentic and lively faith does not come as something I can fully explain or understand, but rather, by its effect and by its awesome power, by the power of the resurrection of Jesus to change us... which is the point of the 1st Peter passage we read earlier,

vs. 3-5

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

This passage was written to early Christians suffering and struggling under very severe persecution, **yet this is a word of hope and celebration ... and its focus is on how the resurrection of Christ Jesus changes everything about our lives into a living hope.** That hope is not, "I hope I am saved", but, assured of my salvation, now I can live in hope... hope that Peter describes as our "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance." By inheritance, Peter means that it is not something we have earned, but it's **our spiritual benefit, as the children of God.** When I was young, I remember that sometimes people gave my older sister towels, sheets & household items, saying that they were for her "hope chest"... **preparing for the home and family she envisioned, yet to be.** That hope chest was a tangible expression of my sister's dreams, as something visible and sure towards something else expected and sure to come later. Though it was not to be completed until sometime off in the future, it was **something that had already starting to happen in the present.** Traditionally young women will begin filling their hope chests, long before there are any actual prospects on the horizon, preparing long before ever seeing that future husband, believing that in time, there will be someone to share it, without even knowing who or when it would actually be... **much like the nature of our Christian hope and faith...** as we read in 1st Peter about Easter and our Christian hope:

vs. 8-9

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Our faith in the truth of Jesus and Easter resurrection, and our walk with the risen Lord in a growing relationship, are like a young woman choosing the special things to put in her hope chest, **all toward fulfillment of her hopeful vision of the future.** Our Christian life with Jesus is about our hopeful vision:

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having hope even in the face of struggles and suffering and reliance not on the visible and understandable, but rather, trusting in an unseen inheritance that is promised and given by **our unseen Lord & Savior**. **Easter marks our new birth into a living resurrection of hope: that is both present experience and future expectation.** Easter resurrection isn't just about what happens after we are dead but how does God's love and grace, God's power and compassion can make a difference **now** in our lives and in who we are, in our relationships, in the hope & joy we live in all we do.

So are we living in a way that remembers the hope & promises of God? * Easter is our wonderful reminder, that as it turns out, **there really is more love, more mercy and grace in God than there is evil, death and destruction in the world.** Easter resurrection is our assurance, the promise and our hope, that God is very present in our times of loss and trouble. Easter resurrection means that pain and wounds of the past can be turned around to accomplish God's good and gracious blessings. It is this certain love of God, this grace of God in Jesus Christ, that allows us to live out our lives in Easter hope, peace and joy... **as we read in Ephesians it all about our God**

who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine ... to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21 NRSV)