

March 13, 2022 “The Unvarnished Truth” 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Lee Strobel boarded a plane. His wife had become a Christian, to his singular surprise. As a result, Strobel with a background in training in Criminal Law, and the job of an investigative journalist for the Chicago Tribune, as skeptical as a man could be, decided he would put those skills to work on the fundamental claim of Christianity. Was there any reasonable basis for belief that Jesus had risen from the dead? He intended to get the facts from experts in the field. He had 4 basic questions. Did Jesus actually die on the cross? Was there a basis for the claim HIS body was placed in the tomb? Was the tomb really empty? And finally, did anyone actually see the risen Christ?

I am going to quote to you bits and pieces of Lee Strobel’s discoveries. Whenever I can I will use his words because they are the words of a skeptic. The quotations are from Lee’s little book, “The Case For Easter.” Actually as I discovered because I have some of his other books, The Case For Creation, The Case For Faith, and The case For Christ: The Case For Easter is the last 4 chapters of Strobel’s, The Case For Christ.

Lee Strobel flew to Lynchburg Virginia to interview Gary Habermas. Strobel had read Boston University Professor Michael Martin’s book, in which Martin had done his best to discredit Christianity. Martin had also made this comment: “the

most sophisticated defense of the resurrection has been produced by Gary Habermas.” Strobel had a 2:00 o’clock appointment Gary Habermas, Ph. D., D.D. Habermas wrote his Ph. D. thesis on the resurrection of Jesus at Michigan State University. When it was published, he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity degree by Emmanuel College, Oxford England. He has since authored 7 books on the resurrection of Jesus, and many defer to him as the expert on the resurrection.

Antony Flew, acknowledged as one of the leading philosophical atheists debated with Gary Habermas on the topic, “Did Jesus Rise From The Dead?” Five independent philosophers were invited to judge the debate. They were all professors from various colleges. Four concluded Habermas had won the debate. One of the judges declared it a draw. Flew did not get a single vote. One judge commented on the record, “I was surprised, (shocked might be a better word), to see how weak Flew’s approach was.... I was left with this conclusion: I would think it was time I took the resurrection of Jesus seriously.”

Lee Strobel sat in the office of Gary Habermas, turned on his tape recorder and cut to the chase. “Isn’t it true,” he asked, “that there are absolutely no eye witness accounts of the resurrection of Jesus?”

“You’re absolutely right,” replied Gary Habermas. “Nobody was sitting in the tomb, saw the body start to vibrate,

stand up, take off the linen wrappings, fold them, roll back the stone, wow the guards and leave.”

Strobel asked, “Doesn’t that hurt your efforts to establish the resurrection as an historical event?”

“No, not one iota,” replied Habermas. “Here’s how I look at the evidence for the resurrection: First, did Jesus die on the cross? And second, did he appear later to people? If you can establish those two things, you’ve made your case, because dead people don’t normally do that.”

Strobel had been convinced that crucifixion was an efficient means of capital punishment. He was convinced that no one survived Roman crucifixion. So that left the second part. So that led to Strobel’s next question. “What evidence is there that people saw him?”

Habermas answered, “I’ll start with evidence that virtually all critical scholars will admit. Nobody questions that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians and we have him affirming in two places that he personally encountered the risen Christ. He says in 1 Corinthians 9:1, “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen our Lord?” And he says in 1 Corinthians 15:8, “Last of all he appeared to me also.”

Strobel had interviewed other experts who introduced him to the fact that this portion of the Corinthian letter contains a creed. Verses 3&4 refer to Jesus execution, death and burial. Verses 5-8, deal with post-resurrection

appearances. “Jesus appeared to Peter, then to the twelve. After that he appeared to 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.” Strobel was impressed but that led to more questions.

“Convince me it’s a creed.”

Habermas began by saying, “I can give you several solid reasons. First, Paul begins with the words, received, and delivered, or passed on in the NIV, which are technical rabbinical terms, indicating he is passing on holy tradition. Second there is parallelism and stylized content that indicate it’s a creed. Third, Paul uses Cephas for Peter in the original text. That’s Peter’s name in Aramaic. Indicates a very early origin.”

“OK,” said Strobel. “You’re saying these things convince you as a conservative, evangelical Christian it’s a creed.”

Habermas bristled. “This is an assessment that is shared across a broad theological spectrum. The eminent scholar Joachim Jeremias refers to this creed as “the earliest tradition of all.”

“How far back can you date it?” Strobel asked.

Gary Habermas replied, “We know Paul wrote 1st Corinthians between 55 and 57 A.D. He indicates in 1

Corinthians 15:1-4 he has already passed this creed on to the church at Corinth which means it predates his visit in 51. That means this creed was in use about 20 years after the resurrection. However, I would agree with scholars who trace it back even further, to within 2 to 8 years of the resurrection, from about A.D. 32 to 38.

Strobel protested, “But its not really first hand testimony.”

Habermas came back with, “Keep in mind that Paul affirms that Jesus personally appeared to him as well, so this provides first hand testimony. And Paul did not just pick up this list from strangers in the street. The leading view is that he got it directly from eye witnesses, Peter and James., and he took great pains to confirm its accuracy.”

“How do you know that?” asked Lee Strobel.

“I would concur with the scholars who believe Paul received this material three years after his conversion, when he took a trip to Jerusalem and met with Peter and James. Paul describes that trip in Galatians 1:18-19. “Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord’s brother.” The NIV says to get acquainted, the GNB says to get information. Habermas points out the text contains the word HISTOREO...what that word indicates is that there was nothing casual about their conversation. Paul was

carefully checking out the details of what was seen by Peter and James.

Finally...it is not that there is one claim of Jesus appearing in the flesh after the resurrection on the Sunday we celebrate as Easter.

1. Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene John 20:10-18
2. Jesus appeared to the other women Matthew 28:8-10
3. To Cleopas and another disciple on the road to Emmaus Luke 24:13-32
4. To 11 disciples and others Luke 24:33-49
5. To 10 apostles and others Thomas being absent John 20:19-23
6. To Thomas and the other apostles in John 20:26-30
7. To 7 apostles in John 21:1-14
8. To the disciples in Matthew 28:16-20
9. Jesus was seen with the disciples on the Mt of Olives before HIS ascension Luke 24:50-52 and Acts 1:4-9

The result of all of this? Lee Strobel joined his wife as a believer.

Let us pray;

Father in heaven, Jesus our Lord and Saviour, Spirit of holiness and truth, we thank you for those who study matters we believe, but hardly understand. Continue to be with us and to bless your Church as we journey through Lent toward Easter. Amen