

UUCWI April 15, 2007 Tom Walker

I set out to discover the facts about Easter
Like Joe Friday, “just the facts, ma’am”
I wanted to know the Who, What, Where and When

So I opened the Bible to find the Easter morning story,
The discovery that Christ had risen from the tomb.
And lo and behold, there were four stories,
Matthew Mark Luke and John,

Undeterred, I looked at all four stories, the Gospels,
And I asked, OK, just the facts, Who went to the tomb on Easter morning?

We’ll start with John:
“Mary Magdalene came to the tomb” says John, just Mary, by herself.
But Wait, Matthew says it was Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary.”
“The other Mary?” I turned to Mark:
It was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James,
And Salome. Who’s Salome?
So I try Luke: It was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James,
And Joanna.

OK, so Mary Magdalene, alone OR with the other Mary,
AND Salome OR Joanna came to the tomb.

When? When did they come?
John says: “While it was still dark”, just before dawn.
Wait, Mark says it was “After the sun had risen”
How about Luke: It was right At Dawn. Not before or after.
OK he hits it between the others.
So I look at Matthew and he wimps out completely:
“it was Toward Dawn.”

So just before dawn OR just after dawn OR right at dawn OR toward dawn,
Mary Magdalene, alone OR with the other Mary
AND Salome OR Joanna came to the tomb.

What did they see there?
The stone was rolled away, and, says Mark,
There was a young man dressed in a white robe
Sitting, inside the tomb.
No, Luke says it was two men in dazzling apparel
And they’re inside the tomb, but they were standing.

Wait, Matthew says it was an angel dressed in white
Outside the tomb, sitting down.
Hang on, John has two angels in white,
Sitting inside the tomb,
And later, in John, Jesus himself shows up, standing, outside.

This is beginning to look like four witnesses to a bank robbery.

So what did Mary and/or the other Mary and Salome or Joanna DO
When they saw this man or men or angel or angels
Sitting or standing inside the tomb or outside the tomb?

Well, says John, they went and told the disciples. What they told them is anyone's guess!
Yup, Luke says the same thing. So does Matthew. They ran and told the disciples.
But Mark says when they saw it, they "fled trembling
And said nothing to anyone."

I was tempted to do the same thing when I read this.
Now it hardly seems likely we'd have this story
If the only witnesses said nothing to anyone.
Matthew must have realized that, because in his usual "let's all come together" fashion
He says the women departed, yes, in Fear AND great joy!

So in summary, here are the facts of the single most important morning
of the Christian faith:
Just before dawn OR just after dawn OR right at dawn OR toward dawn
Mary Magdalene alone OR with the other Mary
AND Salome OR Joanna came to the tomb
Where the stone was rolled away and they saw
A man OR two men OR an angel OR two angels OR Jesus himself
Sitting OR standing, inside the tomb OR outside the tomb,
And they ran and told the disciples OR said nothing to anyone
Trembling with Fear AND Great Joy.

What do fundamentalists do with this stuff?

Let me just suggest to you that the writers of the Bible didn't care that much
About the Joe Friday approach to getting these facts straight.
And neither should any of us.
If you concentrate on the details you can miss the point,
As I believe many fundamentalists do.

But if you asked the Gospel writers "What are the facts of Easter?"
They would agree on this:
After being crucified on Friday, dead and buried,
Christ rose on Sunday. The tomb couldn't hold him.

Now I would suggest to you that this is good news for people who are not Christian.
Because it means Christ will not be confined by the churches.
No matter how hard they try to keep the spirit of Christ
within church walls, within church teaching, within church doctrine,
and say “We got him”
& roll the stone shut and seal it and say that’s that,
come Sunday morning, Christ rolls the stone away,
and is back in the world. Halleluyah.

This is hard for many churches to accept,
That the risen Christ will not be confined
By their conception of him.
They want you to believe you can only access the risen Christ through them.
But to me, Easter is this good news. Christ rolls the stone away.
This is a spirit too big for the church.

One church had the guts to put on its reader board on Easter morning,
Right out in front where everyone could see,
This quote from the Easter story: “He is not here”
Can you imagine? Welcome to such and such church. Christ is not here.
Find him in the world.

No tomb, no church, no creed or doctrine, no restricted access point,
No ticket necessary to get into the tomb and see Christ.
Christ isn’t in the tomb.

But if not in the tomb, then where? Doing what?

I would suggest that Christ is risen so that you may rise,
Rise and become like Jesus was.
Christ is the spirit that holds you up when you do like Jesus did,
When you throw off material things and proclaim the power of spiritual things, as he did,
When you praise the peacemakers and confront the empire, as he did,
When you side with the poor and challenge the rich, as he did
When you expose the hypocrisy of religious leaders, as he did,
When you hunger for justice but love mercy, as he did,
When YOU feed the hungry, heal the sick, and love the children
Christ is risen indeed.

If we would live like that, would we be helped? Would the risen Christ help us?
Would there be one walking with us who has walked that path before?
Would it be not so much the way to be Christian,
As the way to be Human, in tune with the spirit of the Universe?

W.T. Stead was a radical Christian who was jailed early in the 20th Century in England
Trying to get the age of consent raised. From Jail, he wrote this letter:

“Do you know what I think Jesus Christ would do if He came now?
He would go to the church and chapel ever so many times and listen,
And no one would speak to him.
He would look to see who sat ‘round him and he would see no ragged people,
No thieves, no harlots, only respectable people.
And he would hear all these respectable people singing hymns to Christ,
And giving the glory to Christ,
And then after standing it a long time,
Jesus would stand up some day in the middle of the Church
And say just two words: “Damn Christ!”
And then he would go out and go down to some slum
And put his arms around the neck of some poor lost orphan girl
Who was having a bitter cry, and say:
‘Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden,
and I will give you rest...”

and W.T. Stead concludes: “Never tell anyone to be a Christian.
Always tell them to ‘be Christ.’”

Then, and only then, Christ is risen indeed.