

THE EASTER STORY – FACT OR FICTION?

Fake stories abound. They cause a lot of confusion. There are people taken in by fake stories, and there are those who become guarded to the point that they reject truths as unworthy of their belief. Once bitten twice shy. If you have been deceived once by a crook knocking at your door, you become wary of anybody who knocks on your door, even of someone who sincerely brings you good news.

Not all stories that seem incredible are false. Not all stories that seem credible are true. **It is in our interest not to accept or reject stories outright based on prejudice.** It is bad if something true with great implications is rejected outright as much as it is bad if something false is accepted as true.

Suppose a child comes to you excitedly, exclaiming: My teacher says, “Christmas is coming. A jolly senior citizen living in the Arctic is coming with his reindeer flying over the world ...”

How would you react? Maybe you just smile at the sweet child, followed up with an “opportune” add-on advice: “Yes dear, you better watch out, better not cry, ... Santa is coming to town! He is making a list ...”

Some falsehoods last for a limited period in innocent minds; for e.g., a child may outgrow his belief in the Santa story. However, there are people who spread untruths with long-term repercussions. Some untruths may take root and obstruct us from seeking the truths. If we care to reflect on our own experiences in our years of growing up with exposure to childhood stories adults told us, product information that advertisers used to cultivate our loyalty, fear-mongering in social media, propagandas by entities with vested interests, etc., we know that sublimely we have not been immune to negative influences with the propensity to keep a stranglehold on our minds. Some of these influences were jettisoned from our system when we gained wisdom whereas some stay with us stubbornly.

I believe in one’s free will to accept or reject anything – with a caveat:

- If we accept or reject with support by evidence and wise deliberations, **we taste the fruits of our right decisions for a long time to come.**
- On the other hand, if we accept or reject out of hand (without taking time to think) by intransigence, **the outcomes of our**

wrong decision may turn out to be chilling for a long time to come.

- In short, **there is personal responsibility for every decision.**

It is Easter Sunday on 16th April, 2017. Here is an Easter story:



Easter time is a great Bunny Time – a balmy time for the Easter Hares, cuddly and tame, who come out of their rabbit holes to play, bringing colourful Easter eggs and candies for obedient children.

Here is another Easter story (from the Bible) that deserves our thought:

- Jesus rode on a donkey to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. He was welcomed by people who covered his path with garments and palm leaves. (Palm Sunday) They shouted “Hosanna to the son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest” (Mt 21:9). However, the Pharisees were resentful.
- Jesus sat down for a meal with his disciples. **He knew that it would be his Last Supper with them** as he would be betrayed by one of his disciples, arrested and sacrificed on the Cross for the sins of all mankind. The actions and words of our Lord in offering his disciples the bread and wine served to institute the Sacrament of Holy Communion that Christians celebrate to this day.
- Jesus and his disciples went to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. Over there, he was arrested, being betrayed by Judas. **What Jesus earlier predicted came true** – that before the cock crows, Peter would have disowned him three times.

- The Jewish leaders could not find anything wrong with Jesus, even though they paid for people to wrongly accuse him. Pontius Pilate, under pressure, reluctantly pronounced him guilty and finally sentenced him to be crucified on the Cross.
- At the moment Jesus died, the earth quaked. “When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, **"Surely he was the Son of God!"** (Matt. 27:54)
- The body of Jesus was laid in a tomb, sealed with a large and heavy stone. Two days later, Mary Magdalene discovered that the huge stone had been moved and the body was gone, and only the burial cloth was found left behind.
- **Jesus is Alive!** He appeared to Mary. He also appeared to his disciples several times.



- Jesus was crucified. He was buried. "On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures." (Nicene Creed)

Both the rabbit story and the Jesus' story of Easter sound incredible, do I hear you say?

Once upon a time when people first heard the story that the Earth is round and floats in space, it might have been considered that the storyteller was good for a lunatic asylum. However, we are now wise to the fact that a perceived “incredibility” does not in itself provide sufficient grounds for us to determine the truth – to accept or reject (with personal responsibility as our companion for a long time to come). **Our determination of the truth should not be based on pre-conceived prejudice but with diligent investigation.**

Some pertinent devices to help sift out the truth about the Easter story from the fake stories are: (1) Credentials of historical evidence, (2) whether the story is buttressed by not a single source but a multitude of respectable sources,

(3) authorities cited, (4) endurance over a long time of being challenged, (5) test of faith, etc.

The devices we use to reveal the truth can be as many as we can muster. We use them not singly but work them together to our benefits. Even if the Bible story of Easter is incredible, it would be much more astonishing if we simply palm it off (out of hand, out of mind) without investigation, with the least bit of concern that **it is a story closely related to our lives**. After all, the brightest, strongest, most powerful and most capable among us cannot defeat death; we all will die one day, without exception, and **we should have confidence in where we will go – NOT wait and see**.

Evidence from outside Scripture

Witness: Tacitus

If you don't like the Bible, there is still an abundance of historical non-Scripture sources. The real life of Jesus and his public death were a matter of certainty that has changed the course of history.

"The Roman historian and senator Tacitus referred to Christ, his execution by Pontius Pilate, and the existence of early Christians in Rome in one page of his final work, Annals (written ca. AD 116), book 15, chapter 44. The context of the passage is the six-day Great Fire of Rome that burned much of the city in AD 64 during the reign of Roman Emperor Nero. The passage is one of the earliest non-Christian references to the origins of Christianity, the execution of Christ described in the canonical gospels, and the presence and persecution of Christians in 1st-century Rome."

[HTTPS://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/TACITUS_ON_CHRIST](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacitus_on_Christ)

It is highly noteworthy that Tacitus confirmed that Jesus is a historical figure who was executed by Pontius Pilate. Also, until 65 A.D. (during Nero's reign), Christianity spread from Judea across the Mediterranean to Rome. The large number of believers in Christ frightened Nero so much that he felt the need to persecute the Christians. Obviously, Tacitus was an anti-Christian witness to tell his story. He didn't have any favourable opinion of Christians, thinking that

Christianity was an “evil superstition”. **Is there any logic to disbelieve what Tacitus recorded in his Annals?**

Witness: Josephus

The historian, Josephus, was a former Jewish commander of Galilee who fought against the Romans. He eventually became a Roman citizen and wrote many books on Jewish history. The following is an extract from his writings, covering the time and occupation of Jesus:

Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works—a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; (64) and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross,^b those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day,^c as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS; WILLIAM WHISTON

Secular literatures from the Roman era (with modern translations) are plentiful, **bearing independent testimony of the events surrounding Jesus Christ – supporting rather than undermining the Bible records that tell the story of Easter, a story that is closely related to our lives.**

Proving the Incredible

In the morning of Easter, the grave of Christ was empty. This is “incredible”!

“Incredible” but true – Jesus was resurrected! If Jesus was not resurrected, then it must be incredible that the Roman and Jewish leaders were not able to

simply produce the body to prove it to the hilt that the believers were lying. Doubly incredible was that the authorities with all their investigative power supported by the zealous enemies of Jesus across the land were not able to find a single shred of evidence of tomb-breaking against the high security present (huge heavy stone sealing the tomb, the presence of Roman soldiers, etc.) or of the whereabouts of the missing body.

A lot more can be said about the incredibility of unbelievers' claims; yet, the unbelievers could only focus on the "incredibility" of the resurrection of the Lord on Easter morning but not on the incredibility of their propositions that the believers were lying or had reason to lie.

The importance of the resurrection of Christ was at the centre of the apostles' preaching. This message Apostle Paul, the least of the apostles (as he claimed to be), received and passed on:

*"For what I received I passed on to you **as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures**, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."* – 1 Cor. 15:3-8

If it were not so, and the disciples were simply deceiving the world, why would they have given their lives to preaching the message, rising astoundingly from timidity to exemplars of great courage in the face of persecutions? Yet, the opponents who handed out persecutions liberally were not able to prove anything against the believers.

If people are consumed by the "incredibility" of the Easter story from the Bible and secular literatures, they must be fair to apply the "incredibility angle" to their posits that the empty tomb could support a different explanation. If they can't do that, they may want to give themselves extra time to investigate the

story further through both the Christian and non-Christian resources – the story that is closely related to our lives!

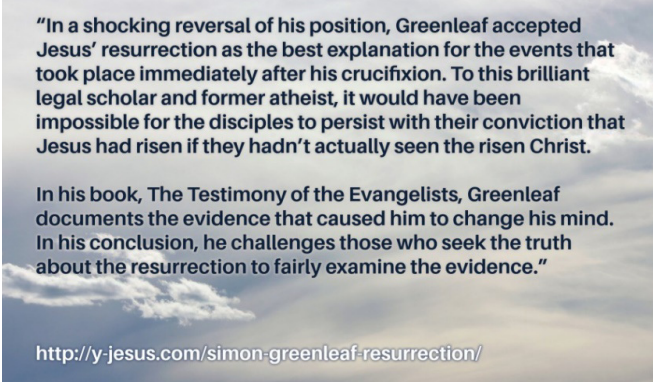
Simon Greenleaf (1783-1853) was a Harvard Law Professor, a world-renowned expert on the law of evidence. Accepting his students' challenge, he set out to prove his claim that the resurrection of Jesus was a legend. Instead, the evidence bowled him over.

The tremendous courage of the apostles and the silence of the enemies prove that the "incredible"

story of Easter is indeed credible while the wild hypotheses of the unbelievers are themselves even more incredible.

The Easter story is a story that is closely related to our lives, and each person bears personal free-will responsibility to accept or reject it.

To those who are in doubt about the truth of the story, I recommend that they don't just dismiss it out of hand but do a research on it with biblical and secular sources of information AND proceed to disprove the story like what Simon Greenleaf first tried and later challenged unbelievers to do the same.



"In a shocking reversal of his position, Greenleaf accepted Jesus' resurrection as the best explanation for the events that took place immediately after his crucifixion. To this brilliant legal scholar and former atheist, it would have been impossible for the disciples to persist with their conviction that Jesus had risen if they hadn't actually seen the risen Christ.

In his book, *The Testimony of the Evangelists*, Greenleaf documents the evidence that caused him to change his mind. In his conclusion, he challenges those who seek the truth about the resurrection to fairly examine the evidence."

<http://y-jesus.com/simon-greenleaf-resurrection/>

John Lee