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John, 21:1-14, English Standard Version, edited.

***21** After this Jesus revealed himself again. ² Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

⁴ Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." ⁶ He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord" ⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish.

⁹ When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹ So Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. Although there were so many, the net was not torn. They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

The symbolism and the truth of the Resurrection.

Recently, I received an email message from a student at a university in a nearby state. He was using the textbook I wrote on 3D modeling and animation. When he saw that I was in Colorado, his home state, he decided to say hi. We ended up talking on the phone so that I could help him with his course project. We got to talking and I told him that I am a reverend now, a pastor. He said that he had been raised Christian, but no longer believed anything in the Bible. He was friendly and

gracious, and not confrontational at all. He told me why he had decided, in high school, that the Bible couldn't be real. I'll get to this. We'll call him Taylor.

Here is a story that we read in the Gospel of John, after Jesus has been crucified and resurrected. It is from Chapter 21. I have edited this to shorten it:

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Depending on how you count them, this is one of eight to twelve appearances

that Jesus makes after he is resurrected. It's intriguing in that at first, the

Apostles do not recognize Jesus. Several of them are out on a boat in the Galilee,

which is in truth a lake, and they catch nothing. The sun rises, and they see a man

on the shore, who calls them "children" and asks if they have caught anything.

They say no, and this man tells them to move their net to the right side of the

boat. This time, the net is bulging. It takes several of them to drag the fish ashore. It is *“the disciple whom Jesus loved”*, which is the author of the Gospel, John, who finally recognizes Jesus. Like good fishermen who are going to sell their catch they count it – 153 large fish. Then Jesus serves them breakfast.

There are at least two somewhat obviously symbolic things in this quote: using the right side of the boat and catching 153 fish. Why else mention these details unless they have some specific meaning? There are several theories as to what the “right side” means. It could be a reminder that Jesus has commissioned the Apostles as fishers of men, and they are to reach out to those who will sit at the right side of God. Others have suggested that he is telling them to move from the shallow water to the deeper water, and that as fishers of men, they will have to work in deep waters. A very non-symbolic suggestion is that they have been fishing in deep water, and by moving to the right side, they will be in shallow water, and therefore on the side of the boat where they will readily see and recognize Jesus. In truth, no one really knows why Jesus explicitly tells them to go to the right side of the boat. But the Bible is filled with symbolism and so over the centuries, people have searched for the reason for this very specific reference.

The other seemingly symbolic statement has to do with the 153 fish. It is an oddly specific number. This apparent bit of numerology has led to many, many

theories. Jerome, a Church Father who died around 420 A.D., believed that around the time of Jesus people thought there were exactly 153 species of fish, and so this would mean that the Apostles should be fishing among all peoples, and that the Church was a welcoming place for everyone. Without getting into mathematical details, if you look at the ellipse shape in the outline of the body of the fish shape that Christians have long used, and that we still put on our cars, the number 153 appears in the ratio of the length to the height of the fish. The problem with this theory is that the earliest evidence we have of people using the fish symbol is from the 2nd century. Another theory is that 153 is the sum of all integers from 1 to 17, and 17 is significant because there are 10 commandments, and the number 7 represents holiness in the Bible. The theories go on and on.

Of course, it could just be that John is putting in some details that we don't need to know, but the details are in truth random. They really did catch 153 fish – and yes, they would certainly have counted them before selling them. Maybe Jesus just happened to point them to the right side of the boat for some unknown reason. The reason that people see hidden meaning in the Bible is that there is a lot of symbolism in the Bible, lots of numbers that have special meanings among the Israelites and the Jews. The number forty was used commonly among the Chosen People to refer to a time of testing, and so the Israelites wandered in the

desert for 40 years and Jesus wrestled with the devil in the desert for forty days and Moses remained on Mount Sinai for forty days. Water represented life, especially everlasting life. Wine represented life and blood: Jesus offered up wine during the last supper because he knew he was about to shed his blood. Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem. Importantly, a donkey was more than a common form of cheap transportation. Kings and people of wealth and power rode horses. But the donkey was a symbol of meekness. Some of the biblical forms of symbolism date back to Greek and other ancient literature: the Greeks, long before Christ, used the donkey as a symbol of humility and nonviolence.

This is why that young animation student, Taylor, told me that he no longer believed that the Bible, neither the Old nor the New Testament, represents real history. There is just too much symbolism in it. Obviously, the authors were radically manipulating the truth to stuff it full of words, numbers, and images that have special meanings. No way, Taylor said, did Jesus just happen to ride that ancient symbol of humility into Jerusalem. Palm branches were known to be a symbol of triumph and palm trees represent uprightness in the Bible. Are we to believe that John, who happens to be the only Gospel writer who says that people laid down palm branches, was telling us what literally happened? Surely, John tossed this into the Gospel story just to add some symbolism.

And of course, Taylor told me, are we to believe that the version of Jesus' crucifixion story, the one we read in Mark is real - and not just symbolic writing?

³³ And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴ And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In the ancient Hebrew practice, the sixth hour was noon. Did it really turn dark at high noon, asked Taylor of me? And in Luke, Taylor said, we are told this:

***24** But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. ² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ⁵ And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise."*

Taylor pointed out that in the Bible bright light means holiness and wisdom and life – and so of course, yes, the two angels wore dazzling clothing. It's all symbolism, he told me. It's not real. There was no resurrection. It's just a symbol-filled story! This is a common argument as to why the Bible should be viewed as fiction, not history. The resurrection of Jesus is often seen as its own counterproof, as a result.

There is an obvious response to this, and that is what I said to Taylor: God is an artist and a skilled craftsman. God uses symbolism when he engineers real life

situations. God engineered the story of the resurrection to be an amazing use of symbolism in a literal event. God's creativity is truly amazing.

Consider the opening of the grave. God could have had Jesus simply pass through the stone that covered the tomb without anyone witnessing it. Instead, the massive stone was moved aside. This is from Matthew 28:

²And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.

I dare you to do better than that. Who can create a better story, some human writer creating fiction, or God, crafting the truth? The opening of the tomb tells us about much more than the release of Jesus from earthly death. That angel, dressed in a perfect white that was unobtainable with the cloth dyes they had back then, and appearing like lightning, tells us that all obstructions, everything that stands in the way of eternal salvation, for all of us, is gone.

Jesus rising from the grave and walking the Earth for 40 days was a tangible, undeniable proof of what he had said early in his ministry. The number 40 was carefully crafted by God to send us a message about the importance of Jesus' ministry. Further, the powerful, poetic description of his mission was meant to make us pay attention to Jesus' reason for coming to this world. These are the words of Christ himself, from John, Chapter 3, and I have edited them:

16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

After his stunning resurrection, Jesus carries out some of his most important work. Jesus appears to the Apostles and performs a miracle that he has performed in each of us. Only a man who was God - only a man who could gloriously rise from the dead - could give us the Holy Spirit to live within us, to guide and inspire us, and to give us a nonstop connection to God. This is edited and taken from John, Chapter 20, after Jesus has been resurrected and has already visited Mary Magdalene to comfort her and assure her that he will be with God. She is the one, incidentally, who announces that Jesus is risen:

19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, Jesus came and stood among them and said to the Apostles, "Peace be with you." 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were glad they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

The Holy Spirit is Jesus' parting gift to his Apostles, a gift that all of us have also been given. This is edited from Acts, Chapter 2, after Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended into Heaven. Peter is preaching, testifying to the resurrection. His words are meant for us: they confirm that the Holy Spirit lives within all of us:

32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. 33 Having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

The resurrection of Jesus is both very real and very symbolic. God knows how to make a point. God knows how to make sure we pay attention to the truth. The resurrection tells us precisely why Jesus came to the Earth. Jesus, during his ministry, long before his death, makes it clear in his own words that the resurrection is planned from the beginning and symbolizes all that he will achieve:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

Taylor found my argument, that the Bible is both real and highly symbolic, intriguing, although he has a long way to go to truly revive his faith. But I think he knows now that God was fully aware that the heart of Jesus' ministry, that his entire purpose for coming to this planet as a human, would have to be tightly bound to a single amazing event, one that would get our attention like nothing else: the resurrection. So, it wasn't subtle or quiet. It was full of powerful symbolism. Remember that you have the Holy Spirit within you – you have God living inside of you. You have an opportunity to live in the Kingdom of God now and for the rest of eternity. These are two astonishing gifts. And they have been given to us entirely through the resurrection. Praise God and praise God's infinitely creative mind. God creates reality - and the reality of the resurrection forms the heart of what we know is true and what will guide us through eternity.

Please pray with me.

God, we celebrate the resurrection, and we thank you for making sure that we could not miss, that we could not ignore, that we couldn't somehow choose to not notice the magnificence of the moment – and what it means for us here on Earth for all of eternity. Amen.