

Acts 3:12-19

¹²When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, “You Israelites why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? ¹³The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. ¹⁴But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, ¹⁵and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ¹⁶And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you. ¹⁷“And now, friends I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out,

Psalm 4 (UMH 741)

1 John 3:1-7

¹See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. ⁴Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

Luke 24:36b-48

³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence. ⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

Conspiracy 101

Let me read you part of the passage from Luke again.

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Luke makes a point of emphasizing the physical reality of Jesus presence with the disciples. He wants us to be sure and note that:

- * His hands and feet bore evidence of having been crucified.
- * He could be touched; he was not a ghost or an apparition.
- * He ate with them.

We will find out why this is important in a while.

In the last month or so you may have read or heard about the Gospel of Judas. The National Geographic Society was involved in translating the ancient scrolls into English, and they unveiled the translation just before Easter. I heard words like “bombshell” and “rocks the foundations of Christianity” used in the press coverage describing the document, and so I was naturally curious about it. It turns out that the Gospel of Judas “rocks the foundation” only of those people that don’t have much of a foundation in Christianity in the first place.

Here is a description of the Gospel of Judas from the internet encyclopedia Wikipedia. *The Gospel of Judas is a Gnostic gospel, the text of which was partially reconstructed in 2006. It has a strong positive focus on Judas Iscariot, but does not claim to have been written by him. According to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Judas betrayed Jesus Christ to the Roman authorities by whom he was crucified. The Gospel of Judas portrays this act positively, as one performed in obedience to the instructions of Jesus, rather than as a betrayal. This positive portrayal follows from the Gnostic notion that the human form is confining, and that Judas was to put into motion events that would release the Spirit of Christ from its physical constraints.*

The Gospel of Judas does not claim that the other disciples were in agreement with such

teachings. On the contrary, its message is that the disciples have not learned the true Gospel, which Jesus taught only to Judas Iscariot, as exemplified in the following words: "Knowing that Judas was reflecting upon something that was exalted, Jesus said to him: Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the Kingdom. It is possible for you to reach it, but you will grieve a great deal. For someone else will replace you, in order that the twelve (disciples) may again come to completion with their God."

The Gospel of Judas goes even further, showing Jesus in various instances criticizing the other disciples for their ignorance. When they present a vision they had to him, he points out the vision's true meaning as follows: "Those you have seen receiving the offerings at the altar — that is who you are. That is the God you serve, and you are those twelve men you have seen. The cattle you have seen brought for sacrifice are the many people you lead astray before that altar. (. . .) will stand and make use of My name in this way, and generations of the pious will remain loyal to Him."

The Gospel of Judas is one of a group of writings by early followers of a religious belief called Gnosticism. The gnostic beliefs have been around for thousands of years in places like Greece and Persia, and in the early years of Christianity, many people combined those beliefs with the developing belief system of Christians.

A one-paragraph description of Gnosticism is that it is a religion that differentiates the evil god of this world (who is identified with the god of the Old Testament) from a higher more abstract God revealed by Jesus Christ, a religion that regards this world as the creation of a series of evil powers who wish to keep the human soul trapped in an evil physical body, a religion that preaches a hidden wisdom or knowledge only to a select group as necessary for salvation or to escape from this world. The term "gnostic" derives from the word "gnosis," which means "knowledge" in Greek. The Gnostics believed that they were privy to a secret knowledge about the divine.

So a believer in Gnosticism would not have prayed the greeting prayer we prayed this morning. (It's ok, you can look at it again in your bulletin.) That is because a Gnostic would not think that the world was a good and beautiful place to be celebrated, but rather a dirty and evil place to be avoided and escaped from.

There were dozens of writings associated with the Gnostic version of Christianity, with names like:

The Gospel of Thomas

The Secret Book of James

The Gospel of Mary

The Apocryphon of John

The Apocalypse of Adam
The Reality of the Rulers
The Three-fold First Thought
and *The Thunder-Perfect Mind*

(I am really interested in finding out what that one is about!)

And now you can add the Gospel of Judas to that list. By the way, some scholars dispute including the Gospel of Thomas in that group.

A doctrine closely associated with Gnosticism believed that Christ was pure spirit and had only a phantom body. That is, that Jesus was not a human, but was only pretending to be human. That Jesus only pretended to suffer and die on the cross, and rather than being resurrected from the dead, just reappeared to the disciples as the spirit being that he always was.

That belief contradicts the statements from Luke in this morning's scripture reading, who takes great pains to describe Jesus as a physical person.

About the second and third centuries, these Gnostic writing had become so common, and were being intermingled with the other writings that would become the New Testament, that leaders of the Christian church became alarmed. They decided that they needed to come up with a group of writings that would be "official" Christian writings, and get rid of the rest.

In choosing the writings to be included in the New Testament, one of primary criteria used was **when** they were written. Writings that were written in the period of time when Jesus or his apostles were alive were considered to be more reliable and accurate than writings that were produced after all of the original disciples and followers had died. So the four Gospels included in the Bible were written by people living at the same time as the early disciples. Revelation, the last book of the Bible was written in the period between 70 and 96 AD, well within the lifetime of people that actually saw and heard Jesus.

Writing produced after this period, including the Gnostic writings I spoke of earlier, were rejected as either being too far removed in time from the actual events, or for contradicting the earlier writings that **were** included in the Bible. As a point of reference, the Gospel of Judas was probably written about the year 180. When the books that became the New Testament were chosen, other writings not included in the group were suppressed and often were destroyed. That is why only fragments of many of these books, such as the Gospel of Judas, are in existence any more.

One way to look at the Gospel of Judas as compared to the Four Gospels in the Bible, is to look at it this way. Suppose four authors wrote books describing the American Civil War. The four authors lived during the war or talked to people that had participated in the war. Their four books, although not agreeing on all the details, were pretty much in agreement on what happened in the war. Now suppose another author, who lives today in 2006, writes a book about the Civil war. This author never talks with anyone who was there or who was even alive when the Civil War took place. This author's book contradicts the books of the four older authors. Now who would you believe, the four older authors, or the author in 2006?

In the year 325, the emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicea. The Council was a group of Christian leaders from all over the Christian world who came together to agree on what beliefs were a part of, or not a part of, Christianity. One of the results of the Council was the Nicene Creed. This creed, along with other creeds in our hymnal, one of which we will be reciting in a few minutes, is a compact statement of what Christians believe. These creeds were written, to among other things, exclude Gnostic beliefs from the official beliefs of Christianity. That is why Christians today are not that impressed with The Gospel of Judas.

In his 2006 Easter address, the Archbishop of Canterbury condemned the credibility of the Gospel of Judas, saying, *"This is a demonstrably late text which simply parallels a large number of quite well-known works from the more eccentric fringes of the early century Church."* He went on to suggest that the book's publicity derives from an insatiable desire for conspiracy theories:

We are instantly fascinated by the suggestion of conspiracies and cover-ups; this has become so much the stuff of our imagination these days that it is only natural, it seems, to expect it when we turn to ancient texts, especially biblical texts. We treat them as if they were unconvincing press releases from some official source, whose intention is to conceal the real story; and that real story waits for the intrepid investigator to uncover it and share it with the waiting world. Anything that looks like the official version is automatically suspect.

Speaking of conspiracy theories, the movie **"The DaVinci Code"** will soon be in theaters. The book by author Dan Brown has been out for a few years and has been generating controversy since it was published. The movie promises to keep the controversy alive.

The premise of the book is that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were secretly married, and had children. The children end up in France and become part of the royal French bloodline.

The Catholic church is suppressing the information and murdering people who catch on. Clues to this secret are contained in such things as the painting of the Last Supper.

The unraveling of the mystery requires the solution to a series of brain-teasers, including anagrams and number puzzles. The solution itself is found to be intimately connected with the possible location of the Holy Grail (which is actually Mary Magdalene) and to a mysterious society called the Priory of Sion, as well as to the Knights Templar. The Catholic organization "Opus Dei" (a caricature of the real Opus Dei) also figures prominently in the plot.

A conspiracy theory if I ever heard of one. Full of secret knowledge, secret societies, evil deeds. It almost sounds Gnostic.

The idea that the royal blood of France can be traced back to Jesus and Mary Magdalene has been around for hundreds of years; Dan Brown did not make it up. The idea has persisted, I think, in large part because it provides a sense of involvement for its French believers. After all, all the events depicted in the Bible, from Moses and Pharaoh, to Jesus and Pilate, to Paul and Silas, took place somewhere else than France. France is never mentioned, directly or indirectly, in any of the Scriptures. But faithful French Christians can get some sense of involvement if they believe that Jesus's children lived in France, and that their descendants still live among them.

And this isn't only a yearning among French Christians. Listen to the words from the hymn Jerusalem, practically the national hymn of England:

*“And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon England's mountain green?
And was the Holy Lamb of God on England's pleasant pastures seen?
And did the Countenance divine, shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here among these dark Satanic mills?
Bring me my bow of burning gold! Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear, O clouds unfold! Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight, Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem, In England's green and pleasant land.*

If you have seen the movie “Calendar Girls”, then you will remember that the Women's Auxiliary group that the ladies belonged to sang this hymn at every meeting. I actually got the words from an Emerson, Lake, and Palmer record album from 1973 that contains their electronic version of the hymn. I didn't realize the significance of the song when I first heard it in high school.

Many Americans also have a yearning for Jesus to have a direct connection to our country, as those of us living in Utah know full well.

You know, the Archbishop of Canterbury is right - we all love conspiracy theories. “**The DaVinci Code**” is only the latest of a long line of movies based on conspiracies, secret societies, and secret organizations. I didn’t have any trouble coming up with a long list of examples.

How about the three movies where the Earth’s entire population is enslaved by intelligent computer programs, who feed an artificial reality into our minds? Only a small group of humans have escaped from the illusion and are battling against the computer, mostly with martial arts fighting. I’m talking about the Matrix movies.

Or perhaps somewhat more believably: how about a couple of movies where the CIA has trained super assassins for special missions. One of the agents develops amnesia of his past actions, and must run for his life to escape capture and death as he tries to recover his past identity. I’m talking about the Bourne Identity and Bourne Supremacy movies starring Matt Damon.

If you are more into comedy movies, here are some more examples.

A super secret government organization is responsible for overseeing alien creatures that have emigrated to earth and live in New York City disguised as humans. The bulk of the population have no idea of the creatures living among them. The secret agents have their identities erased and only go by one letter names. They also wear black suits. Men in Black.

And my personal favorites involve a secret agent from England who is battling an evil genius. The evil genius is head of a secret evil organization, bent on conquering the world. The evil organization develops a variety of ways to menace the world, including “Laser Beams” and “liquid hot magma”. Fortunately, Austin Powers is able to defeat Dr. Evil every time.

My point isn’t to have a movie trivia session, but to point out that conspiracy theories, secret organizations, and evil plots are such a part of our consciousness these days, such a part of our thinking, that it is easy to believe that everything in our world works that way. Sure, Austin Powers and the Matrix movies are *so* far fetched, *so* obviously unreal, that it is easy to see that they are made up. But what about a movie that is not so obviously far fetched, not quite so ridiculous? A movie whose author implies, but does not quite come out and say, is based on reality? A movie that mixes historical accuracy with the author’s

imagining?

My point is not to tell you that you shouldn't see "**The DaVinci Code**", or read the Gospel of Judas. On the contrary, if you are interested in them, by all means see them and enjoy them. I probably will.

My point is to provide you with enough information and background to show you that "**The DaVinci Code**" and the Gospel of Judas, are almost - almost - but not quite the truth. My point is to try and convince you that not everything in life is part of a conspiracy - that some things should be taken at face value.

Perhaps one of the problems with Christianity today is that it is *too* straightforward, *too* simple. An idea that can be summed up in one verse, John 3:16, ¹⁶"*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* You can't get much simpler or more straightforward than that.

So next time you hear, or read, or see a conspiracy theory, and are tempted to believe it, I hope you will remember that not has to be that way. Sometimes, what is simple and straightforward is best.

Amen