

It's that time of year again. No, I don't mean springtime, or baseball season, or hay fever season. It's the Easter season. And in the entertainment world, it's one of the few times of the year when it is politically correct to talk about Jesus.

Take a look at the schedules of Discovery or History channel and you'll see what I mean. "The Lost Tomb of Jesus." "The Real Jesus of Nazareth." "Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery." Based on names alone, you'd think that the whole culture had suddenly embraced their Christian roots.

But turn on a few of those programs and you'll be sadly disappointed. For the Jesus that is portrayed in these specials is rarely the Jesus that we know. Oh, he's generally caring and compassionate, a good teacher and a friend to the friendless. But the power is gone. The miracles. The wisdom. The purpose.

To be sure, that's often the point. Because, more often than not, their goal is shock value, pure and simple. Their purpose is to advertise something scandalous, something that will startle us into finding out exactly what they have to say about Jesus. For the sake of ratings and money, they have attempted to snatch away that which is most valuable to us just to get our attention. And unfortunately, in the case of many Christians, it's like taking candy from a baby.

So how do we confront this problem? How do we hold fast to the Jesus we know? The Jesus who was born of a virgin, walked on water, healed the sick, and as we celebrated last week, rose from the dead? How do we proclaim this Jesus that we know so well in the midst of all the evidence they throw our way? Well, let's take a look at some of that "evidence," shall we?

In recent years, there's been a particular resurgence of study in the "lost books of the Bible." These include such texts as the Gospels of Mary, Thomas, Philip, and Judas, and are collectively known as the "Gnostic Gospels." Ever since Dan Brown wrote *The DaVinci Code*, people have been curious about these ancient texts.

Truth be told, most of the content in these books is harmless. The Gospel of Thomas, for example, is simply a collection of sayings of Jesus, many of which are virtually identical to quotes from the four canonical Gospels. The original manuscript of the Gospel of Judas is frankly so full of moth holes, burn marks, and decay that it's hard to make heads or tails of what it's trying to say. Though I gotta say that the researchers have done a miraculous job of "reconstructing" the text, based mostly on what they want it to say.

So why are these books such a problem for Christians? Well, because they incite two rather disturbing doubts. First, why aren't these books in the Christian canon? In other words, why weren't they accepted by most churches in the past, and why do we still reject them today? And second, is there something important that's in these texts? Something that we're missing out on?

Let's deal with that first question. Why aren't these books in the Christian canon? For that matter, why are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the canon? I think that's best explained in first chapter of 1 John that we just read:

*"That which was from the beginning, **which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands**, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and **we have seen it, and testify to it** and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you.**"*

Simply put, the Gospels are part of the Christian canon because they agree with what the apostles saw, heard, and experienced. They agree with what the apostles wrote and taught. In a country like the United States, a country of 330 million people, where you need millions of dollars to get a single TV ad, it's hard for us to imagine exactly how small the world was at the time of Christ, where the population of the Roman Empire was only 5 million. It's hard for us to imagine how much of the world 12 men could reach, especially 12 men empowered by the Holy Spirit.

So when a book appeared that talked about Jesus of Nazareth, it wasn't that hard to go find someone who was there and could confirm it. Someone who could say, "Yes, that's exactly what happened." Or deny it and say, "Oh no, that's not how it happened at all."

Four of those books told the account of Christ's life and ministry accurately. Four of them agreed with the apostles. Four of them were inspired. And four are in the Bible. The rest... didn't. And for centuries they were simply ignored, at least until Dan Brown and a bunch of TV producers decided they'd make a good plot for a book or movie or Easter special.

Which makes the second question I mentioned pretty irrelevant. Is there anything important in the Gnostic Gospels? Not likely. But what if there is something true in them? As I said, the Gospel of Thomas does have some passages that are remarkably similar to the canonical Gospels. Should we read it now as a new source of information about Jesus?

Let's start with something a tad more reliable. Say... our Gospel lesson for today. There, we read more words from the apostle John, *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*

Why did John write his Gospel? Was it to give us every single detail about Jesus' life? Was it to give us every word that he ever spoke? No! It was to give us what we need to know. And, according to John, what do we need to know?

We need to know that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, and we need to have faith that he has given us life. That after all the words were said and all the miracles performed, there was a cross and an empty tomb. That on Easter morning Jesus rose for you and for me so that we might have hope. So that we might have confidence in more than just teachings and sayings and signs, but in the living, breathing body of our Lord.

And John isn't alone. Mark begins his account by saying that this is, *"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."* The beginning of the good news that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Luke does the same. He tells Theophilus: *"It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you... that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."* And what were they taught? The content of Luke's Gospel. That Jesus lived, died, and rose again.

Matthew too does something similar by ending his Gospel with the Great Commission, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* How do we make disciples? What do we teach them? How do we know that Jesus is with us to the end of the age? By reading what Matthew has just written. Because that was the whole point.

Four Gospels. Four writers. One point. Jesus is the Christ, the risen Son of God. Believe and be saved. And that is something you will not find in any Gnostic writing. Which really makes me wonder... are they really "gospels" at all? Do they contain "good news"?

No, they don't. Which makes the answer to all our questions pretty obvious. There is nothing truly important in any of them. The Gospel of Thomas, as harmless as it may be, does not tell us one single thing about our salvation. Nor would any other text we might discover in the future.

So the next time that Discovery or History Channel or writers like Dan Brown try to shock you into doubt, just remember the words of Jesus to Thomas. Touch his nail-scarred hands and feet. Put your hand against his side. Look upon the body of your risen Lord. Put your faith in the good news of his death and resurrection. Because that is where your answers lie.

And ask yourself, "Are we looking at the same Jesus? Are they proclaiming my crucified and risen Lord?" Because you know and I know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and His name does give you eternal life. Amen.