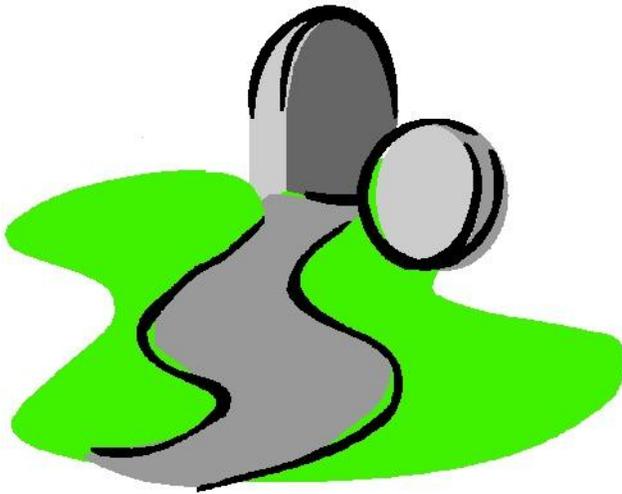


THE RESURRECTION



At the very heart of the Christian faith is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The earliest New Testament documents to be written were the letters of Paul, and it is clear that the resurrection of Jesus was central. "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved," Paul declared (Ro. 10:9). In his first Thessalonian letter, one of his earliest, Paul writes, "We believe that Jesus died and rose again" (1 Th. 4:14a). His explanation to the Corinthians is equally unequivocal: "I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand ... Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures ... he was raised on the third day

according to the Scriptures" (1 Co. 15:1-4). In fact, Paul is so bold as to say that without the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus, the Christian faith is nothing less than a charade (1 Co. 15:12-19).

The resurrection of Jesus was always at the forefront of the early Christian preaching of the gospel. Luke records that Peter (Ac. 2:24, 31-32; 3:15; 4:10; 10:40) and Paul (13:29-31; 17:2-3, 31; 23:6) boldly proclaimed in their sermon the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. In fact, one important function of the twelve apostles was especially that of giving eye-witness testimony to their experiences with the living Lord after his resurrection. Christ did not appear to all the people, but rather, to those whom he had specially chosen to be his witnesses—those who ate and drank with him after his resurrection (Ac. 10:41-42). These witnesses were the twelve apostles who were with him from the time of John's baptism until his ascension into the heavens, and their testimony of his resurrection was essential (Ac. 1:21-22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:20; 13:30-31).

The historical reality of the resurrection has often been questioned. In the first place, no one actually viewed the resurrection when it occurred. After the resurrection, the soldiers who had been guarding the tomb were startled by the angel who came to roll away the stone, and they spread the story that the corpse had been stolen (Mt. 28:2-4, 12-15). In modern times, various naturalistic explanations have been offered, ranging from the idea of a supra-historical reality (leaving the physiological side unexplained) to the so-called swoon theory, that is, the notion that Jesus never really died but lapsed into a kind of coma from which he eventually revived in the cool air of the tomb. Such theories, however, are certainly not what the biblical testimonies themselves say. Rather, the biblical witness is that Jesus was actually raised from the dead by God, the Father.

The historical reality of Jesus' resurrection rests upon two kinds of evidence: the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord. While the first of these might not seem to be as significant as the second, further reflection suggests that it is not to be passed over too quickly. Any announcement that Jesus was still alive could have been quickly dispelled by simply producing his corpse, but all the witnesses agree, including the women (Mk. 16:1-8; Mt. 28:5-7; Lk. 24:1-3; Jn. 20:1-2), the men (Jn. 20:3-9), and the temple guards (Mt. 28:11-15), that the tomb was empty, and this after it had been closely guarded by soldiers. Furthermore, since the tomb was freshly hewn and had not previously been used for burial, there were no other corpses present to confuse the issue (Mt. 27:59-60; Lk. 23:50-53; Jn. 19:41-42). The only remnants left in the tomb to indicate that Jesus' body had been there were the strips of linen cloth and the facial napkin (Lk. 24:12; Jn. 20:6-7).

The other evidence of Jesus' resurrection was even more decisive, because he appeared in resurrected form to his disciples, both men and women, and in the words of Luke, he "gave many convincing proofs that he was alive" (Ac. 1:3). He appeared to Mary of Magdala (Jn. 20:11-18; cf. Mk. 16:9-11), to the other women (Mt. 28:9-10), to Peter (Lk. 24:33-35; 1 Co. 15:5), to Cleopas and his companion (Lk.

24:13-35; cf. Mk. 16:12-13), and to the apostles (Lk. 24:36-43; Jn. 20:19-25; cf. Mk. 16:14), all on Easter Sunday.

A week later, he appeared to the apostles again (Jn. 20:26-29; 1 Co. 15:5), some time later to seven disciples in Galilee (Jn. 21:1-24), later still to all the apostles in Galilee (Mt. 28:16-20; 1 Co. 15:6) and on one occasion to over 500 disciples (1 Co. 15:7). In addition, he appeared to James (1 Co. 15:7). On the day of his ascension, he appeared to all the apostles (Lk. 24:44-52; Ac. 1:1-11). Finally, on the road to Damascus, the Lord appeared to Paul (1 Co. 15:8; 9:1; Ac. 9:3-6; 22:6-8; 26:12-15). These appearances were sure and sufficient evidences that Jesus was alive.

In the face of this biblical testimony, the question must surely be raised, "Does it matter?" Why is the resurrection of such importance to Christian faith. Even if Jesus did not rise from the dead, would not the essential truth of Christianity remain unimpaired?

The fact is, as Paul says, the entire Christian faith does indeed hang upon a single event—the resurrection of Jesus (1 Co. 15:14-17). If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then the Bible misrepresents God, Christians are both deceivers and deceived, and God is neither the living God nor the God of the living (Mk. 12:27). Even worse, death is stronger than God, and the greatest human enemy, death, is ultimately victorious. If Jesus' career ended in a tomb, then all his claims and promises which he made while on earth are lies. His prayer "thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven" is an empty plea. If Jesus is dead, his entire message is a farce, and whoever he was, he was certainly not the Son of God nor our living Lord. Furthermore, there is no future resurrection for us either. Christ is neither the firstborn from among the dead (Col. 1:18) nor the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Co. 15:20-23).

The Christian English poet, John Donne, well describes the Christian hope in his sonnet, *Death Be Not Proud* (1633):

*Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death thou shalt die.*

This, of course, is the final meaning. If Jesus is indeed alive, then as he also said, "Because I live, you also will live (Jn. 14:19). "I am the Living One," he declares; "I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Re. 1:18). In the great judgment, which all of us will face at the end (Ro. 14:10; 2 Co. 5:10), it is an overwhelming comfort to know that the living Jesus will stand to defend his people (He. 7:25; Ro. 8:33-39)! As Jesus himself said, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven" (Mt. 10:32). He will not be doing that if the story ends in the tomb!



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