

Exploring the Resurrection -5- Exploring the evidence

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Eleven appearances of Jesus to his followers, in the forty days from his resurrection to his ascension, are recorded in the New Testament.* Later he appeared to Stephen at his stoning, Paul on the road to Damascus and John on the Island of Patmos.** In a separate booklet *Did the Writers of the New Testament Get Their Picture of Jesus Right?* I have looked at the evidence we have for eyewitness testimony in the stories reported in the gospels. As far as the resurrection appearances are concerned this is particularly evident in the stories reported in Luke 24, and John 20, 21. If you wish to consider arguments for the eyewitness nature of these writings then you may like to read this booklet, or, better still, read the accounts in the New Testament and judge for yourself. "Notice the testimony of the women in an age when women were not considered proper witnesses in either Jewish or gentile law"

There are other arguments, in addition to those I have presented in that booklet, supporting the integrity of these accounts. One is the unvarnished reporting of the weaknesses and unbelief of the apostles in the face of what happened. Wouldn't we expect them, as the first witnesses, and founders of the Church, to be idealised in an invented story? Notice, too, the prominence given to the testimony of the women in an age when women were not considered proper witnesses in either Jewish or Gentile law. These things were reported simply because that was the way they happened. C. H. Dodd has pointed out that the gospel narratives are free from the legendary embellishments of later apocryphal accounts. They simply recount the surprise of the empty tomb and the way Jesus' followers only gradually realised its significance after encounters with the risen Christ.

In this booklet, however, I wish to focus on just one line of evidence - that the remarkable events which followed that first Easter morning could never have happened if Jesus had not risen bodily from the grave.

*Matthew 28; Luke 24; John 20, 21; I Corinthians 15:5-7.

**Acts 7:56; 9:3-6; I Corinthians 15:8; Revelation 1:9-20.

The transformation of the disciples

It would be hard to imagine a group of people so changed in their goals and outlook as the disciples were in the 50 days between the two Jewish feasts of Passover (when Jesus was crucified), and Pentecost (when the message of the crucified and risen Lord was first preached by them). The picture we have of the disciples before the momentous events of Passover Sunday is that of a fearful, dispirited and defeated group of men and women. The one they loved, and in whom they placed all their hopes for the future of Israel, had been brutally executed. The few who had the courage to venture out had seen the grisly details and some of them had buried him. They kept their doors locked, fully expecting that they would be next on the list. Luke captures their despair vividly in the picture he gives of Cleopas and his companion in Luke 24:13-24.

Fifty days later the picture is dramatically changed. The disciples have been transformed from a rabble into an effective team for leading the fledgling and fast-growing church. Peter, who denied and forsook his Master when the crunch came, is now fearless, and publicly faces the crowds of Jerusalem proclaiming that Jesus is the promised Messiah and risen Lord. Questioned twice before the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of the land, he cannot now be cowed by threats, imprisonment, beating or death sentence. Thomas the doubter is now fully convinced that Jesus is both risen from the dead and is God. James, Jesus' brother, who had previously been sceptical about his brother's claims, is now identified with the believers. Later he will become leader of the church in Jerusalem. Mary, who had watched her son's agonising death, instead of retreating into mourning, is now praying with the disciples as they await his promised gift of the Holy Spirit. Nothing could stop them, not even the violent persecution launched by the hostile rabbi, Saul of Tarsus.

What made the difference? They did not change because their circumstances had changed. The situation looked just as desperate at Pentecost as it had at Passover. The Jewish authorities were still adamant in their opposition to Jesus' message. And yet it is obvious that something had happened.

Luke, who spent two years in Judea from AD 57 to 59, and who would have known many of the persons involved in these dramatic events, records the reasons the apostles themselves gave for this transformation.

Peter to the crowds at Pentecost: Men of Israel, listen...Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourself know...you with the help of wicked men, put him to death... God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. (Acts 2:22-32)

Peter in the temple: You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this (Acts 3:15).

Peter before the High Court: Rulers and elders... It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you completely healed...we cannot help speaking what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:8-10,20).

Peter again before the High Court: The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead - whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree... We are witnesses of these things (Acts 5:30-32).

Peter to Cornelius' household: God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen - by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead (Acts 10:40,41).

Paul in the synagogue at Antioch: God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had travelled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people (Acts 13:30,31).

Accusing the Jewish rulers of murdering the promised Messiah would hardly have won friends for the disciples! That they would have so risked their lives for what they knew was a lie is unimaginable. They believed that Jesus had risen and that they had met with him.

One thing is clear. The disciples hadn't expected Jesus to rise from the dead, though he had told them several times that he would. Some Jewish beliefs at the time accommodated a view of resurrection, but this idea was of a general resurrection of all the righteous in the future, when God's people would be vindicated. The idea of a single individual, in whom all the prophecies of old were centred, rising from the dead as the guarantee of a future resurrection, was not part of their world-view. And yet it is equally clear that they were convinced that this had indeed happened.

The conversion of Paul

Perhaps even more startling evidence for the truth of the resurrection is the earthquake that took place in the life of Paul of Tarsus. What transformed a zealous and merciless persecutor of the church into an ardent preacher of Jesus Christ and possibly the greatest Christian missionary of all time? Paul tells us himself: a personal encounter with the risen Jesus. "The idea of a single individual, rising from the dead as the guarantee of a future resurrection, was not part of their world view"

Before his conversion Paul was a scrupulously faithful Jewish rabbi, a trained theologian, and a rising star in the political world of Palestinian Judaism. He belonged to the strict sect of Pharisees. He calls himself "a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee" (Acts 23:6). That a man who had been executed as a common criminal could be proclaimed as the promised Messiah was both folly and blasphemy to Paul. He says, "I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison" (Acts 22:4). According to Luke, he "devastated" the church (Acts 8:3). The word here is used in Greek literature of the ruin and devastation caused by an army, and in the Greek Old Testament of a wild boar ravaging a vineyard (Psalm 80:13)! And yet Paul could later describe himself as "a skilled master builder" laying the foundations of churches around the Roman empire by his preaching of Christ (I Cor 3:10).

How was it that one reared in strict Jewish monotheism would come to unhesitatingly call Jesus "Lord" in the same sense in which that title is used for God in the Greek Old Testament? What would persuade someone immersed in the Jewish culture of his day to reject circumcision as the sign of their covenant relationship with God, to eat with Gentiles, to eat non-kosher food, or to write, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 2:3-5, 11-16; 3:28; 6:12-15; Romans 14:2,3)?

The personal hostility that Paul's new stand aroused among former Jewish colleagues was intense. His former career was in ruins. He had to flee for his life on two occasions, first from Damascus and then from Jerusalem itself. And, tirelessly, at great personal cost, he poured himself into the work of preaching this astounding message. To try to explain all this without reference to the resurrection, as someone has put it, is like trying to explain Roman history without reference to Julius Caesar.

Paul's confidence in the reality of the resurrection was twofold. First, he had personally met the risen Christ. Luke, who became one of Paul's closest friends and travelled with him on several of his journeys, tells the story of that encounter in Acts chapter nine. Later in the book he repeats it twice in Paul's own words (Acts 22 & 26). It was an event that marked Paul for life.

But his faith was not built solely upon a personal experience, marvellous as it may have been. The testimony of other reliable eyewitnesses was also of the utmost importance to Paul. Scholars are unanimous that Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, written in AD 53 or 54 is genuine. Paul concludes this letter with a long discussion about the resurrection - first the resurrection of Jesus, and then that of all believers at the end of human history when Jesus comes again. He gives a list of some of the people to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection. "He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living...Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me..." (I Corinthians 15:5-8). Peter and James were personally known to Paul, as no doubt many of the 500 would have been. William Lillie, head of the Department of Biblical Study at the University of Aberdeen, wrote of these 500 witnesses:

St. Paul says in effect, "If you do not believe me, you can ask them." Such a statement in an admittedly genuine letter written within thirty years of the event, is almost as strong evidence as one could hope to get for something that happened nearly two thousand years ago.

On the basis of his own experience, confirmed by the testimony of numerous others of his contemporaries, Paul, like the original disciples, was convinced that the crucified Jesus was now risen.

Interestingly, Paul's experience of Jesus was the reverse of the other disciples' experience. Whereas they had known him as a human friend, then had seen him crucified and then experienced him in his resurrected body, Paul began with the resurrected Jesus. From that he worked backwards. His subsequent thinking about the meaning of Jesus' death and the significance of his human life was coloured by his experience of him as the risen Lord.

The content of the Christian message

A further powerful testimony to the reality of the resurrection is the very content of the Christian message itself. It is significant that after the resurrection, in spite of persecution, hardship and martyrdom, there is not a pessimistic note in the New Testament. A dominant theme is that death has been conquered once for all by the resurrection of Christ. Paul, facing possible execution in a Roman prison, cannot decide whether he would rather live or die, "I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body" (Philippians 1:23,24). Writing to Christians in Thessalonica who have lost friends who have died, he urges them not to "grieve like other people, who have no hope. We believe Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" (1 Thessalonians 4:13,14). As far as Paul is concerned, Jesus has "destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). "the reality of the resurrection is the very content of the Christian message"

The writer of Hebrews declares that Jesus came to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death", and commends those who "joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions" (Hebrews 2:15; 10:34). And the apostle Peter says that Jesus has given us "a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and ... an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:3,4).

Such confidence comes on page after page of the New Testament. The history of the Roman empire for the next 250 years abounds with incredible stories of heroism and even joy, in the face of suffering and often martyrdom. They believed that death, "the last enemy" had been defeated in the death and resurrection of their Saviour. The convictions expressed by the early Christians were worlds apart from the philosophy behind the American Civil War song, "John Brown's body lies a moulding in the grave, but his soul goes marching on."

Altogether there are about 630 references to resurrection and eternal life in the New Testament. It is the theme that undergirds everything else in the Christian gospel: the forgiveness of sin and guilt; the possibility of living a genuinely human life that is pleasing to God; the ultimate triumph of good over evil; the eternal destiny beyond death for those who trust in Christ.

The ultimate triumph of good over evil is a confident theme of the New Testament. It is in the light of Christ's resurrection that Paul urged the Christians at Corinth to "always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). By his resurrection Christ had conquered death, and therefore evil, which is the cause of death. His ultimate victory when he would come again to judge the world was thus guaranteed. All that had been done sincerely in his name would be rewarded. There are something like 300 references to this event in the New Testament - when he would eliminate evil and establish God's reign of justice and truth.

The New Testament writers saw all these things as the fulfilment of all that the prophets of the Old Testament had been seeking. Peter tells how the prophets "searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Peter 1:10,11). Without the resurrection, the work that God had begun in calling Abraham and Moses, as well as in leading and teaching his people over the centuries, would have been like a great unfinished symphony. Archbishop William Ramsey reminds us:

It must not be forgotten that the teaching and ministry of Jesus [alone] did not provide the disciples with a Gospel, and led them from puzzle to paradox until the Resurrection gave them the key.

That the early Christians should have been so confident in proclaiming this message without the absolute certainty that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead, goes against all the canons of sound reason.

Simon Greenleaf was the Royall Professor of Law at Harvard University. His famous work entitled A Treatise on the Law of Evidence, written in 1842, is still considered one of the greatest authorities on evidence in the entire literature of legal procedure. In his book An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered

in the Courts of Justice, written while at Harvard, he reviews the motives the writers of the gospels would have had for not proclaiming these truths if Jesus had not risen from the dead and they had not known the fact as certainly as they knew any other fact. He concludes:

And their writings show them to have been men of vigorous understandings. If their testimony was not true, there was no possible motive for its fabrication.

The rapid growth of the Christian church

That there was a church at all is also remarkable testimony to the truth of the resurrection. Luke, who was closely associated with people involved in the events he describes, documents the rapid spread of Christianity in the very earliest period. On the day of Pentecost he mentions 3,000 believers and shortly after, 5,000 (Acts 2:41; 4:4). "More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number" (Acts 5:14). "The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). All this was happening within walking distance of the place where the crucified and discredited Jesus had been buried, an unlikely place to start a new religion that was based on his resurrection, if indeed it was not true. "Without the resurrection there is a gaping hole in the middle of the first-century history that nothing else can plug"

From Jerusalem the gospel spread outwards through Samaria and Syria to what is now Turkey, and on to Macedonia, Greece and Rome. The Roman author Tacitus (who regarded Christianity as a harmful superstition) wrote of "a great multitude" of Christ's followers who gave their lives in Nero's persecution in Rome only 34 years after Jesus' death. Around the city of Rome itself there are about 600 miles of catacombs where, during the first three centuries, something like 4 million Christians were buried. There is evidence also that within a generation of Jesus' death and resurrection the gospel had spread to Egypt and westwards to India and Mesopotamia. And the growth continued. For example, in a letter to the Emperor Trajan about AD 112, Pliny, the Roman governor of Bythnia (on the south coast of the Black Sea), expressed his concern at the growing number of Christians in his territory.

The birth and growth of the Christian Church from a tiny band of frightened men and women to a world-wide movement is remarkable. Without the resurrection it is inexplicable. It is even more remarkable when you consider that this was a religion that demanded the highest standard of morality and social awareness, as well as a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord. This kind of commitment was unknown in other religions. It might also involve social ostracism, imprisonment, torture and death.

If we don't accept the truth of the resurrection, what are we going to put in its place? Tom Wright, one of Britain's leading New Testament scholars today, says:

We know of several Jewish movements of revolt in the first century. In most cases, they ended with the death of the leader. Where such groups carried on, it was because a new leader emerged. No new leader, no continuing movement. Without the resurrection, there is a gaping hole in the middle of the first-century history that nothing else can plug.

The continued life and growth of the church, and the impact of the gospel on the lives of people over nearly two thousand years, is also a strong pointer to the truth of the resurrection. Professor C. E. B. Cranfield of Durham sums this up well:

Last of all must be mentioned the continuance of the Christian church through nineteen and a half centuries, in spite of bitter and often prolonged persecution, in spite of all its own terrible unworthiness and incredible follies, in spite of its divisions, and in spite of all the changes which the passing years and centuries have brought. The fact that the church still produces today (as it has produced in all the past centuries of its existence) human beings, who, trusting in Jesus Christ crucified, risen and exalted, show in their lives, for all their frailty, a recognisable beginning of being freed from self for God and neighbour, is an impressive pointer to the truth of the Resurrection.

It is also significant that more people are becoming Christians today than at any time in history, particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Summary

Sceptics have always been able to come up with alternative theories to the resurrection. For example, it has been suggested that Jesus wasn't really dead and revived in the cool of the tomb. He then managed to remove the stone, evade the guards and convince the disciples that he had conquered death once and for all! Another explanation offered is that the disciples stole the body and spread the story that he had risen. (Amazingly, they managed to turn society upside down and face persecution and death without any one of them letting the cat out of the bag!) A third idea put forward is that the disciples went back to the wrong tomb, found it empty and thought he must have risen. For some unknown reason even the authorities couldn't find the right tomb and produce the body! Or maybe this varied group of men and women all had hallucinations of a similar sort which convinced them that Jesus had risen.

I suggest that, in view of the evidence, such theories look rather ridiculous. Whatever changed the disciples must have

been something both clear and powerful. Clear, to make itself felt to people who were in no way predisposed to accept it. Powerful, to remould once and forever their ideas of what the Messiah had come to achieve. Only the resurrection satisfies both conditions.

The Jewish scholar, J. Jeremias, has demonstrated that about fifty tombs were venerated by the Jews before the time of Jesus. In view of such interest in the tombs of holy men, J. Delorme asks:

In these circumstances, is it possible that the original community of Jerusalem could have been completely uninterested in the tomb where Jesus was laid after his death?

The disciples were not interested simply because Jesus was not there. The Bible teacher R. A. Torrey summed it up:

The bodily resurrection of Christ is the cornerstone of Christianity, the Waterloo of infidelity, the Gibraltar of Christian evidences.