

Christianity is a phenomenon in the world – without question the most influential set of convictions in the history of the world – because of the events described in the four Gospels and the early chapters of the book of Acts. Jesus, as you know, was, at the request of the Jewish leadership, crucified by Roman soldiers on the Friday of Passover week in Jerusalem during the reign of Tiberius Caesar and the governorship of Pontius Pilate. Even the most pronounced skeptic does not doubt this historical datum. The segments of the ruling Jewish elite that had been most offended by Jesus and jealous of him thought that they had rid themselves of their rival. But on the following Sunday news began to circulate through various segments of the population of greater Jerusalem that Jesus had risen from the dead. “Oh, no!” they must have thought. “Here we go again.” Strangely, however, after that initial burst of amazement, dismay, and controversy there was a lull. For some weeks there was almost nothing in the way of any public controversy over Jesus. Rumors continued to spread but that was the extent of the fuss. Indeed, in most circles of Jerusalem society it must have appeared that Jesus was like a number of other messianic pretenders who had come and gone in those years, promising great things but always failing to deliver. One such man had created a stir by promising to part the waters of the Jordan River; another to bring down the walls of Jerusalem. But the river continued to flow, the walls stood unmoved and the men and their movements came to nothing. Such, it seemed, had been the lot of Jesus of Nazareth as well. There was a collective sigh of relief in the circles of local religious leadership.

During those forty days, however, and unbeknownst to the civil and religious leadership, the risen Jesus was in fact meeting with his disciples and putting the finishing touches on their preparation for their future ministry, a preparation for ministry to which he had devoted a great deal of his time during the previous three years. These men were now to take the message of Jesus and salvation to the whole world and the Lord wanted to be sure they were ready. Those forty days were, in fact, the calm before the storm. After the Lord’s ascension to heaven and on the following Sunday, which happened to be the next in the yearly order of great Jewish feasts – the next in order after Passover – and with the city once again full of pilgrims, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and they went out into the thronging streets and began to proclaim not only that Jesus had risen from the dead and was alive again, but that he was indeed the long-promised Messiah and the Savior of the sinful world. It was a Pentecost such as never had been celebrated before. It was a message that might well have been laughed at or simply ignored – as unexpected as it was and as great a violation of conventional Jewish sentiment at the time – but, in fact, large numbers of Jewish folk that day, some 3000, not only believed what they were hearing, but realized that it was a message that must change root and branch the commitments of their lives. Because Jesus was alive and present by his Holy Spirit, they could be as much his followers as those who had been his disciples during the years of his public ministry. That very day they found themselves joining a new community and enrolling as servants of a new mission.

Pentecost was only the beginning. Day after day the disciples were in the streets of the city telling people what had happened: that Jesus had risen from the dead as he had said he would and what this meant for them and for all men. And in a thousand conversations in homes, in the market, in the temple, and in the halls of government, these new Christians, fresh with the conviction of wonderful and supernatural realities, began explaining their new faith to others.

They amazed and convinced many; they offended many others. But they would not be denied and the message spread rapidly. Come on; admit it. If you had before you irrefutable evidence of the conquest of death it would excite and thrill you too. It would change the way you think about everything and you couldn't help but talk excitedly about it to others.

In the previous chapter of the book of Acts, Luke relates a miracle that occurred in the temple in those heady days. A man whom we today would perhaps describe as a paraplegic made his living begging at the temple gate. Peter and John encountered the man on their way into the temple one day and healed the man *in the name of Jesus Christ*. That is, he invoked the risen and living Christ's power to heal him. Just as Jesus had healed so many during his own ministry here again *he* healed a man, but this time *through his disciples*. Folk in those days weren't as gullible as people nowadays like to think. They knew the difference between a sham and a real exercise of divine power when they saw one. This was no magician's trick; no psychosomatic healing; this was the genuine article. A man long known as a cripple, familiar to many, was suddenly jumping up and down singing the praises of Jesus of Nazareth. Some perhaps who were there that day had witnessed Jesus do similar things; most would not have. They were stunned. This was the power of God. And if they failed to get the point, Peter went on to explain it.

“Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed.... You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong.”

It was electrifying. Still more people believed: they could no longer resist the evidence of their ears and eyes. These people, these followers of Jesus, *were speaking the truth*. They couldn't explain it, but the conviction that this was all true had overcome them. The amazing things the disciples of Jesus were saying *had to be true!* Not only had they seen Jesus alive again – too many had seen him to dismiss the reports; there were too many eyewitnesses telling the same story – but these same people were now exercising Jesus' power and authority in the world in ways no one could deny. *It is at this point that the short text we read picks up the story.*

The temple officials interrupted Peter and John's speech to the crowd gathered in the temple court. They were both angered and offended. They were concerned that the apostles – another name for the disciples – were stirring up the crowd. One had always to be careful in those days about public order. The Sadducees, in fact, were largely supportive of the Roman rule and were concerned to maintain the good will of the Roman government, a government that frowned on excited crowds. But that was not their real concern. This was no riot. The Christians were not inciting the crowd to disorder or violence.

The fact is the Sadducees – the Jewish party or religious community that largely controlled the temple in those days – did not believe in a resurrection. They didn't believe in *any* resurrection or even the possibility of resurrection. That denial was one of the defining planks in their religious platform. They did not believe that those who died could or ever would come to bodily life again. And here were these confounded Christians not only proclaiming from the rooftops

that their arch-enemy, Jesus of Nazareth, had himself risen from the dead and that they had seen him alive again – they had even spoken with him on a number of occasions – but were calling on all men to reckon with the fact!

That is the significance of Luke's form of words in v. 2. He says that the apostles were proclaiming *in Jesus the resurrection of the dead*. That is, they were not simply saying that Jesus had risen from the dead. They were saying that of course. They were telling everyone they met that Jesus had risen from the dead. Everyone knew about Jesus. He had been an absolute sensation in Galilee and Judea for most of three years. His crucifixion had been a highly public event. Before he was put to death everyone had been talking about him, arguing about him, many wondering openly if he might be the Messiah. They had heard about, if they had not seen his powerful works of healing, had heard his teaching – utterly unlike the teaching they were familiar with – and many had some experience of his remarkable personal authority. He was a phenomenon and people were deeply divided over what to think about him.

Now to hear *he* was alive again: *that was news!* To have the report verified by so many good people, people who had known him well, people whose unabashed wonder was proof enough that they were proclaiming nothing but what they themselves had seen and heard. They spoke with the authority of the eyewitness. They *had* to be taken seriously.

No wonder the apostles of the Lord *proclaimed* that Jesus was risen. It was the proof positive that he really was the Son of God and really was the Messiah. Could you think of any message more perfectly suited to confirm everything Jesus had ever said than that he had conquered death itself? No doubt they also proclaimed the fact of Jesus' resurrection because it was their strongest suit. The authorities couldn't produce the body and no one really believed it had been stolen.

But Luke makes clear that they were not only proclaiming that *Jesus* had risen from the dead. As we read here, "the apostles were proclaiming in Jesus *the resurrection of the dead*." That is a different thing, a still greater and more wonderful thing. Jesus' resurrection may be amazing. It may be a fact that forces us to reconsider many things. But happy as we may be to know that Jesus of Nazareth, so cruelly and unjustly put to death on Friday, rose from the dead the following Sunday, it is altogether more wonderful to think that *I* might rise from the dead; that *you* might rise from the dead just as he did. After all, *you and I* are certainly going to die. However unwelcome a fact, fact it is. It is the brute fact of human life. It is the reality that casts its shadow over our lives.

We are creatures, we human beings, created as we have been in the image of the eternal God, who are not comfortable in time. We were made for the future, for the eternal indeed. We cannot be satisfied simply to know that for a day or week or month or year or decade sometime in the past all was well with us. We cannot truly sustain ourselves, we cannot be happy; our lives cannot retain their real meaning if we cannot see before us the promise of the future. And it is death that finally steals from us that promise. It is the end, a dark finality, that robs us of everything we truly long for. We were made for life, not for death. It is one of the grand uniquenesses of human beings among all the living creatures. Death is a problem for us, a great

problem in a way that it is not for any other creature. Death strikes us as unnatural, fearful; the thought of it breaks our hearts. The Bible says that human beings live in bondage to the fear of death all their lives and many psychologists will tell you the same thing. They point out that a great many features of man's life – from his anger to his compulsion for sex – is a subtle, deep-seated way to keep death at bay. Welcome to the Viagra generation! We will not simply give way to the night; we cannot; we cannot bear to.

Believe me, my friends. Yesterday completed the worst week of my life. We had planned for this week for several months and it was to be a particularly happy week, but it was suddenly sad beyond the power of words to describe. And it will not surprise you that it was death that transformed the light into darkness. This past Wednesday – a sunny, wintry morning in Minneapolis – my wife and I stood in a cemetery, the grass its winter brown, the trees still bare, a chill wind blowing, and watched through tears the little coffin bearing two tiny babies being lowered into a grave. The broken hearts of all who were there, the devastated hopes of our eldest daughter and her husband and all who love them were testimony enough that *death is an enemy*, an intruder, an alien power that is the contradiction of everything we know human life is intended to be and that we long for it to be.

Do you remember Tennyson's verse?

“Whatever crazy sorrow saith,
No life that breathes with human breath
Hath ever truly longed for death;
'Tis life, not death, for which we pant,
More life, and fuller, that I want.

Through all the history of the world it has been so. I came across a letter again recently written nearly 2000 years ago. It was written in the 2nd century letter by a woman whose friend who had lost a child to death. [Oxyrhynchus Papyri (I) No. 115] Philo and Taonnophris, a married couple at Oxyrhynchus, in Egypt, are heartbroken, having lost their son and Irene, a friend of the sorrowing mother, writes to express her sympathy. She understands their pain; she had lost her own son (or, perhaps her husband), one Didymas. She struggles to write the letter. She and all her family have fulfilled the duties expected of mourners (perhaps these were some funeral offerings or prayers; in our day people show their sympathy by sending flowers or if Roman Catholic, by buying a mass for the dead). But what more to say? She fills up the letter with their names, perhaps because she doesn't know what else to say. She has finally nothing to offer but resignation. How can you console when you have no consolation to offer? How can you console when there is no consolation?

Irene to Taonnophris and Philo, good comfort. I am as sorry and weep over [your] departed one as I wept for Didymas. And all things, whatsoever were fitting, I have done, and all mine, Ephhroditus and Thermuthion and Philion and Spollonius and Plantas. But, nevertheless, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort one another.

She feels for her friend, but death is too great for her as it is for her friends. But *what if* there were consolation; real, wonderful consolation? What if there were hope that the dead might live again?

Now breaks upon the world this very message, a message proclaimed with power and joy by people who had seen its confirmation with their very eyes. Death *is not* the end. At least, it need not be. There is a power abroad in the world capable of overcoming death. Indeed it *has been* overcome. Jesus rose from the dead and in his rising made it possible for human beings to live again after *they* have died *just as he did*. That is what it means that they proclaimed *in Jesus the resurrection of the dead*. They were saying that Christ's resurrection was not for himself but for us. It was not simply an amazing event; the resurrection of Jesus was nothing less than the portal through which vast numbers of other human beings may pass to eternal life.

Would you not have supposed that everyone, whatever he or she might have thought beforehand, do you not suppose that everyone would have greeted this news, this message with eager interest? After all, we all want to live forever. None of us can really bear to think that he or she must die – which is why we hardly ever think about it and why it is such a crushing blow to learn that the hour of death is upon us – surely we would greet the news *at least with hope that it might be true*. However skeptical we might be, we would be delighted to be proved wrong and to know that we might live even though we must die.

And all the more given the undeniable fact that Christ's resurrection was not simply a return to the existence he had before, like some form of reincarnation in which his circumstances might be better but could be worse. No, his resurrection had brought him into a form of human life higher and more wonderful than anything known in this world. It was eternal life not only because it would never end, but because it partook of perfection in every way: physical, moral, mental, and spiritual perfection; human life as we know it *ought to be*. Resurrection brings life to its completeness.

Surely, I say the message that such a conquest of death was a real, a living possibility, we might well think would be universally greeted with hope, with the deep and abiding hope that it might be true. But, sad to say, and so true to life, there were many who *did not want to believe it and wouldn't believe it* simply because it had not been their idea, because it contradicted their cherished beliefs, and because it gave satisfaction to people they had considered their enemies. What a perfect and what a tragic example of that all too common human capacity to cut off one's nose to spite one's face! They closed their eyes and ears to the greatest news that had ever been proclaimed in the world – that sinful, unworthy human beings might live in love, joy, and glory forever and ever – because it was not *their* news. How tragic; but how utterly typical. How sad, but how true. It wasn't the evidence or lack of it that kept the Sadducees from believing what the disciples were saying or facing the implications of the wonderful thing they had done for the crippled man. There were many priests among the Sadducees and we read later in Acts [6:7] that a large number of priests became Christians, no doubt a number of them Sadducees. The evidence was more than good enough for them. No, the problem for these Sadducees, as for many people today, is not the evidence. It is rather that to become a follower of Jesus, to

embrace the reality of his resurrection, means that one must join himself to Christians with their Christian views, and for many people that is asking too much.

There are a great many reasons to believe that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a historical fact. The evidence has convinced a very large number of people who had no predisposition to believe it until they carefully considered it. There are also, without question, many reasons why people do *not* believe, but these are not such good reasons. It is a sad thing for people not to believe that Jesus rose from the dead and that in him they might also rise from the dead because it wasn't their idea, or because they have not believed it for a long time and are used to their unbelief, or because it would create a stir, even a rift in their family, or because people might mistake them for some kind of religious fanatic, or because becoming a Christian would require them to change their beliefs about other things. These are the reasons that stopped the Sadducees. But who gives a fig for any of that if, in fact, by faith in Jesus Christ, you might close your hand on the key to the gate that leads to everlasting life?

Don't be like the Sadducees who – however surpassingly wonderful it would be to know, really to know that death is so far from the end of your existence it is, in fact, the gateway to the true and everlasting fulfillment of all of your truest and highest longings as a human being – turned from the possibility for no good reason at all. One of the reasons why the Sadducees, who were so close to the happiest truth in the world, turned their backs on it was that in order to embrace this message, in order for it to transform their hopes, *they would have had to become Christians!* Yuk! They would have had to become a part of that mob of unsophisticated people who had annoyed them so much over the past few years. They would have to eat crow; admit they were wrong. They would have had to go slumming with the unwashed; and they weren't about to do that!

Listen, we get this. We know very well that Christians aren't always the best recommendation of the Christian faith. Many Christians, in one way or another, are something of an embarrassment *to us* so we understand why they would be unappealing to you. We often find ourselves saying that with friends like we have, we don't need enemies. And concerning ourselves, even at our best and even the best of us are, we admit, an acquired taste! It wounds us to think that our weaknesses and our all too common failures to adorn this wonderful message of eternal life in Jesus Christ might prove a stumbling block to other people believing it as we have believed it: that we might be the reason someone refuses to believe in Jesus! We can say nothing in our defense except that we are still sinners, that we believe from our hearts that we have been saved *by God's grace* and not because we deserved God's favor, and that in this we are ourselves the very demonstration of our message. Christ did it; he did it for us; he gives it to us. Christians aren't better than others. We are as needy as everybody else. We just happen to be the beggars who discovered where to find the bread!

But we also encourage you to realize that we may surprise you. You may find that once you have found Christ and eternal life in him, you may find us Christians less of a pain and more of a pleasure.

Perhaps you have heard of the new book, *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University*? Kevin Roose was a student at Brown University in Rhode Island but he spent a semester undercover at Liberty University – an evangelical Baptist University in Lynchburg, Virginia. He intended to write an expose of the so-called religious right and figured that if he lived as a student among the Christian students of such a school he would get an insider's view of a world he considered as pathetic as it is dangerous and would be able to expose its hypocrisy and ugliness with an insider's authority. He played the part of a Christian student, speaking and acting very differently than he would at Brown. He wore different clothes, joined the choir at Thomas Road Baptist Church, the whole nine yards. He admits in the book that he had to work twice as hard at Liberty as he did at Brown. He studied harder, he exercised more, he abstained from alcohol, he lost weight, and when he dated Liberty girls he admits that he felt liberated from the secular hook-up culture. The experience didn't make him a Christian or change many of his political or social views but, contrary to all his expectations going in, he left the school with a much more positive view of its people, even an admiration for them.

What particularly impressed him was the kindness, even the love the Liberty students showed him when he finally fessed up to what he was doing there. He had been living among them as a spy. He was taking notes for a book. Every conversation, unbeknownst to his school mates, was potential fodder for his expose. He had engaged in an elaborate deceit among them, had deceived them, and acting as one of them had in fact used them for his book. But one of his roommates said simply, "How could I not forgive you when I've been forgiven so much." Roose admitted to one Liberty professor, "I never expected the people here to apply the principles of their belief to their lives in such a real way." He even is willing to say that, for all his differences in belief, Liberty feels to him like home. [Karen Prior, "Surprised By Love," *Books and Culture*, Monday, March 23, 2009]

We wish we were better Christians than we are, believe me; but please don't allow us or anything else to keep you from the careful consideration of this message of the resurrection. I cannot help but wonder what those Sadducees might have thought and what they might finally have concluded about both Christ's resurrection and the possibility of their own had they somehow got past their prejudices. What a sad thing, to hear the words of life and refuse to believe them. To hear what so many others have discovered to be irrefutable truth, however surprising and unexpected, and hardly even to consider the message.

I urge you not to make the Sadducees' mistake. Listen carefully as the eyewitnesses to this wonder tell you about it and explain that, still more wonderful than Jesus' own resurrection is the fact that it is the guarantee that many more human beings, condemned to die as all people are, will rise again to new and eternal life just as he did.

We Christians will admit that it is not easy always *to feel* the reality of the world to come and the life after death. The wonder of that doesn't always weigh on us as we know it should or as we want it to. But, as C.S. Lewis, the author of the *Narnia Chronicles* once put it, "it is just as hard to keep on feeling as if you believed you were going to be nothing after death. I know this because in the old days before I was a Christian I used to try." [*Letters to Children*, 61]

Remember, we are not finally talking about *feelings* at all. We are talking about what happened once and what it means for everyone forever. What the Lord Christ's resurrection means is that there is something fabulous, something "...extraordinary that lies just on the far side of the ordinary..." (R.J. Neuhaus)