

“What Everyone Should Know About Easter”

Acts 3:1-16; 4:1-4

Easter Sunday Morning

April 5, 2015

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We are reading from Acts 3:1-16, the second volume of Luke’s early church history, the Gospel the first volume and the book of Acts the second, Acts carrying the story on from the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ to the establishment of the Christian church.

Text Comment

- v.6 “In the name of Jesus” means “by the authority of Jesus” or “by the power of Jesus.” These men couldn’t heal this man any more than you or I could; they knew that.

- v.10 In other words, this was the genuine article. Everyone present knew that something supernatural had occurred; there was no other explanation possible, as had been the case with the Lord’s miracles during his public ministry. *No one ever accused Jesus of Nazareth of having pulled the wool over people’s eyes, of being some kind of a magician or a trickster.*

- 4:2 The Sadducees were particularly annoyed because one of the characteristics of their viewpoint was the denial of the resurrection of the body at the end of history. Among the various sects and parties of first century Judaism the Sadducees were the liberals or the theological progressives of their day.

- v.4 The word used here for men is the more specific term for males. So, apparently, we should add many more to the number to reach the total number of men, women, and children who became Christians. The standard estimate of the population of Jerusalem at this time is between 25 and 30 thousand inhabitants, though some have argued for a higher number. But the population of the city could swell by several times its usual size at the pilgrimage feasts, such as Pentecost, which had occurred not long before this. But whatever the population of the city and however long after Pentecost this particular event occurred, 10 to 15 thousand Christians, a number reached in at most some weeks’ time, was an extraordinary number. The phenomenal growth of the movement must have been particularly galling to the Sadducees because it was based on the claim that a man had risen from the dead, the very thing they thought to be impossible! They had thought they were rid of Jesus of Nazareth but now he was back again!

Now I want to consider the text that we have just read, with its remarkable narrative, to make a simple point, Peter’s point. *The resurrection of Jesus Christ was for those earliest Christians the explanation of everything. It was the event that changed the world!* Indeed, it was what had changed them! They had been distraught; all their hopes had been dashed to pieces by the death of Jesus Christ. They thought his program had come to an ignominious end and now, a few weeks later, they were boldly proclaiming his victory to the crowds in the streets of Jerusalem! As we read in 4:2 the resurrection of Jesus *was* their message. And as Peter told the crowd who

were nonplussed by what they had seen, the explanation for the man's healing was nothing less than that God had raised his Son Jesus from the dead and that Jesus himself was again at work in the world but now through his disciples.

Today is Easter. Some years ago it would have been quite likely that the average American who wandered into church on Easter Sunday – and a great many Americans would have gone to church on Easter even if not frequently the rest of the year (indeed, it was not so long ago that a great majority of American would have been in church on Easter Sunday) – I say, the ordinary American would have been relatively well informed as to the meaning of the holiday and the importance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Like many people they might never have thought very seriously about what was actually being claimed, but they knew by and large what the Bible taught and what Christians believed.

That is no longer the case. Survey after survey of the religious knowledge of Americans confirms the same fact: Americans know precious little about the Bible or about the Christian faith. So perhaps it is time for us to go back to basics, start from the beginning, and review what it is the Bible teaches about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that event in history that lies at the foundation of the Christian faith and is remembered and celebrated on Easter Sunday. It is not too much to say that the resurrection of Jesus Christ *is the central claim of Christianity*. Christians readily admit that Christianity would never have come into existence had it not been for the resurrection of Jesus. It is both the message *and* the reason for the message!

I. First, let's define the term. Resurrection is the Bible's word, the word the early Christians used; the word Peter used here and it means the awakening of the dead to immortal life.

In the Lord's ministry on a few occasions he brought the dead back to life: for example, the son of the widow at Nain and his friend Lazarus; he did this only a few times but he did it those few times. But being restored again to *mortal* life, only eventually to die again, is not what the Bible means by resurrection. *Resurrection is not reanimation or resuscitation*. It is not bringing someone back to where he or she was before. The Bible teaches that all human beings will be brought back to life at the end of history, but not all will be brought back to wonderful life, to happy life, to life with a capital "L." All human beings will *exist* forever, but some will exist in happiness and goodness forever; others will exist but separate from God and without the true fulfillment of human life. In other words, there is a resurrection that leads to life and a resurrection that leads to judgment. No human existence, no human life, no human being is ever simply extinguished, never to exist again. *But by the term resurrection the Bible ordinarily means restoration to that immortal life of human perfection*: moral, spiritual, and emotional perfection in the fellowship of God, the angels, and all other human beings who likewise found salvation through faith in Jesus Christ; a multitude, the Bible assures us, is so great that no one will be able to calculate its number. *That is what the Bible means by resurrection*. The resurrection is how the followers of Jesus Christ participate in the renewal of the entire creation that will take place at the end of history.

In Jesus' own case, he died; he died as we must all die; as every human being eventually dies. In fact he died a particularly cruel, painful death. He was dead; the Roman soldiers made sure of

that! His corpse, his dead body was taken down from the cross on which and by which he had been executed and his body was committed to the grave. But those limbs that were for several days stiff and cold became warm with life again. The still and silent body was invigorated with new life; he stood up and walked. He spoke to his disciples, he ate and drank with them. Over the course of some 40 days he sat with them and taught them what had happened and why. It was the self-same Jesus, once stone-cold dead, alive again; *but not simply alive*. It was clear to all that his new life was a *higher* human life. He had powers that he had not had before. It was human life, but a superior to what he had before, a life fit for the world to come. This is the resurrection: the concrete re-embodiment of those who have died, especially the righteous. *And Jesus' resurrection, the Bible teaches, is the pattern for the eventual resurrection of all those who trust in him. As he rose from the dead, so shall they.* Still today, there has only been one such resurrection; but *there has been one*. And that one is the guarantee that there shall be others; a host of others!

That is the Christian message! Death has been conquered on our behalf by our Savior, Jesus Christ. He died, as we must die; but he rose again to new and everlasting life, *and we will do the same* if we trust in him. That is what Christians call the *gospel*, or the good news. You can actually live forever -- not just exist but live forever in true goodness, happiness and love -- as deep down in your hearts you know very well you were meant to live forever. Now, whatever else you may say or think about human life, *if this is true, this changes everything!*

II. Second, the claim is that this awakening to new and eternal human life is not an idea; it actually happened, it was an event in history.

This is Peter's point in 3:13-14: the people to whom he was speaking knew what had happened to Jesus of Nazareth. They knew he had died; some had participated in his death. And they had heard, no doubt they had heard through the weeks before that Jesus was alive again. And now they were seeing the evidence! What is taught in the Bible and what Christians believe is that Christ's awakening to life after death *is what actually happened*. On a day like today, in the spring of the year, just outside the city of Jerusalem, the man who had healed the sick and who had taught such remarkable things and had lived such a remarkable life, the man who had been executed by those who were jealous of his popularity and his influence, came alive again. *A dead man was walking, fully, beautifully alive; as no man has ever been before.*

No one was expecting this. Many Jews believed that at the end of history there would be a general resurrection of all people; not all Jews believed this, but most of them did. But *no one* expected a resurrection in the middle of history. There is no evidence that has ever been found that anybody thought there would be a resurrection of anyone prior to the end of history. This was an event that defied everyone's expectations, including the Lord's own disciples, who were mourning what they took to be Jesus' defeat; the failure of his movement and his program, and their own humiliation. They thought they had bet on the wrong horse! But having seen the Lord Jesus die, they now saw him alive again! Not only one or two; lots of people, hundreds of people saw him alive again. And with the kind of conviction that only eyewitnesses of events can have, the news spread from mouth to mouth and heart to heart that Jesus was alive again!

Christianity is a religion of history; it is based on events that happened in in space and time. It is not a collection of ideas; it is the report of things *that happened*; that *God did* in the world. Now we are, of course, well aware that many people do not believe that any such thing actually happened. They think the Christian claim that Jesus rose from the dead is a myth or a legend, a mistake or, in some cases, even a hoax. They think that in a day like ours, in which we indulge the illusion that we are more scientific and intellectually sophisticated than people have been before, no one should believe in such a thing. There were skeptics and deniers at the beginning and there have been ever since. The first question about the resurrection of Jesus Christ is always, must always be: *did it actually happen?*

But, while we understand *why* people would not believe it happened, why they would be skeptical – after all, it had never happened before and it has never happened since – the case for the resurrection as a historical event is very strong and, when it is carefully investigated, it continues even today to convince people, even the highly skeptical.

I challenge you to read the four gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. You will find that they do not tell precisely the same story. The main point is the same, but the details differ from one to another. That has sometimes been thought evidence that the accounts are not historically accurate. But, in fact, “lawyers and judges have regularly declared that this is precisely the state of the evidence they find in a great many cases: this is what eyewitness testimony looks and sounds like. [I]n such cases the surface discrepancies do not mean that nothing happened; they mean that the witnesses have not been in collusion.” [N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, 122] They are not as it were getting their stories straight so they would all saying exactly the same thing. A made up story wouldn’t have such features. But the early Christians knew what they had seen!

In fact, there is a huge mass of evidence that demonstrates that the story of Jesus’ resurrection was not made up and that it is simple history and not some religious myth. The presence of women as witnesses to the resurrection is one such piece of evidence. In that time and place, if one was making up a story one wanted others to believe, and there were many such concocted stories in those days, believe me, he would not make women central to the story as they are in the Gospels. People didn’t credit the testimony of women in those days as they should have. Another interesting piece of evidence that I came across for the first time in my reading this past week is the seven week period that separated the resurrection itself from the public announcement of it by the Lord’s disciples. Why should there have been this curious gap of seven weeks between the event itself and its public proclamation? The only truly satisfactory explanation is that *this was in fact the way it happened*. No one would have written the story that way otherwise. Our natural assumption is that if Jesus Christ had risen from the dead, the fact would have been shouted from the housetops from the very first day. But while the myth maker can write his story to fit his purpose, the historian must take what the facts give him. [F. Morison, *Who Moved the Stone*, 156-160] And in this case those seven weeks were the time the risen Lord met with his disciples, taught them, and prepared them for what was to come. An utterly unlikely and completely unexpected development, but it was what happened! Again, a concocted story would not have been written that way. Indeed, there is nothing about the gospel accounts that is mythological in character. Read them for yourselves and see!

Other prophets, other messiahs came and went in Jesus' own day. Routinely they made promises they could not keep; often they died violently at the hands of the state. Their movements died immediately with them. But this is what *did not happen* in Jesus' case. He died violently and within weeks of his death his movement was capturing the hearts of thousands of people and would continue to do so in the months and years to come. Why? Why did that happen? How could it have happened? The reason the Christians themselves gave was that Jesus had risen from the dead. It had utterly surprised them, but surprising or not it was what had happened. Other reasons for the advance of the Christian faith have been proposed, but none of them has proved remotely convincing. Even unbelieving scholars can't seem to agree on any one generally convincing explanation for the explosive growth of the Christian church. Usually they simply ignore the historical problem. The tremendous growth of the Christian church, its sudden and utterly unexpected entrance upon the stage of world history, its transforming power in individual lives and upon nations and cultures requires an explanation. There is no other adequate explanation apart from the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

III. Third, the Resurrection contains within itself virtually the whole of the Christian Faith, the whole of the message of the Bible, and the whole of the gospel, or good news.

Accept the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and a great many other vital truths follow in train. It is for this reason also that the resurrection can be described as the *central fact* of the Christian faith. This is why we read in 4:2 that the message of the followers of Jesus was the preaching of the resurrection of the dead in Jesus Christ. Obviously, if Jesus rose from the dead on that Sunday morning,

1. His other claims have been vindicated in the most dramatic and incontrovertible way. He *was* the Messiah, obviously. He *did* come into the world to save sinners. He *is* coming again to judge the living and the dead. It *is* true and *must be* true that "God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Jesus really *was* the Son of God. The resurrection puts paid to all doubts about that!

2. If Jesus rose from the dead, then Christianity is right to affirm the goodness of the physical world and, in particular the human body. While other religions may believe in the immortality of the soul, they pay little attention to the future *of the body*. Christianity is unique among all the religions of the world in proclaiming a message which, at the time that message arose, was a most unlikely and unwelcome message. It cut across the grain of what everybody thought and everybody believed. The resurrection of the human body as part of the salvation of the human being was heresy at that time. The physical world, including the human body, was thought to be the source of all evil in the world. But Christianity has at its heart the promise that you, your entire self, your body and soul together, you, in the full integrity of your humanity, can live forever. That message owed its confidence and power to the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

The human body is a fabulous creation. It *is* a creation, of course. The notion that the human body with its incredible utility and beauty and all its extraordinary powers – a living, breathing machine vastly more sophisticated and complicated than anything human beings can create and yet so much more than a machine, a conscious person, a moral agent, a being with extraordinary powers of communication, of giving and receiving love, and of jaw-dropping inventiveness – I

say, the notion that the human being is some biochemical accident is frankly beyond preposterous. The human being, body and soul interwoven together, is God's masterwork. And even if in this world of sin and death our bodies are degraded, and abused, and have become shadows of their true selves, even if they grow old and die, they are still undeniably God's masterwork. There is nothing in this world remotely as extraordinary as a human being.

God did not create something as wonderful as a human being -- this splendid psycho-physical existence we all take so much for granted -- in order simply to throw it away at the end. This impossibly great invention of Almighty God *will not come to nothing*. It has a future! *You* have a future; life in this world is not all there is. What does the Bible say? "A thousand years are but a day to God." When the day will come, no one knows, but that the day will come we know *because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ*.

You know *who* you are. You know *what* you are! You know what it means to be a human being and you know that your body is as much a part of you as your soul. What you long for beyond anything else is the life that you were meant to live: body and soul. Christ's resurrection is the proof that you, *as you are*, can live forever. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is proof that God did not make you to exist for a few years and for your life then to come to nothing. You are too important, too wonderful for that.

3. Third, if Jesus rose from the dead, then his death on the cross was obviously and clearly what he said it was: a ransom paid to the justice of God to deliver us from sin and guilt.

You want to be a better person than you are. You want to be free of the insidious selfishness that weighs down your life as it does mine. You want to love others as you know you ought to. You want to rise above the temptations of the world that so often drag you down. You know something of what it is like to be happy, but there is also much sadness in your life and so much of that comes in one way or another from moral failure. You know what it is to be young and full of life, but you know very well that mixed up with what is best in your life is a great deal of which you are ashamed. That is why you hide your thoughts from others as carefully as you do. It is why you disappoint others as often as you do and why you are disappointed by them as often as you are. You know you will get physically feeble when you get old, but you are already morally feeble, if only you are honest enough to admit it. We all are. You know you were made to be better than you are, to be more high-minded, pure, honest, and especially to be more loving than you are, more generous and more kind.

Human life is a moral affair. We cannot escape the fact. We are sinners before a holy God. We are always thinking and acting badly! So a happy future requires not only the conquest of death, but the conquest of sin. And Jesus conquered both for those who trust in him. What makes the resurrection of Jesus so significant *is that it follows his crucifixion*, that death by which he suffered in our place the punishment our sins deserved so that God might forgive our sins and then deliver us from the power of sin, gradually at first and finally all at once at the resurrection.

IV. Fourth, and finally, the resurrection makes Jesus Christ whatever else you know about him, whomever else you may admire him for, it makes Jesus Christ the most important person in the world to you and to everyone else.

The fact of his resurrection is the proof that Jesus Christ is the only savior of sinners, the only one who can put you right with God your maker, the only one who can deliver you from your sins, your moral failures, and the only one who can give you a place in heaven forever. This is Peter's great point here: human life is all about Jesus Christ.

People object to that, especially nowadays, like they objected to so many of the Christian claims when they were first made. They think there should be many roads to God. They think it unfair that there should be but one. So thought vast number of citizens in the Greco-Roman world in the time of the birth of the Christian church. But if Jesus Christ is God, if he came into the world as a man to save us from our sins, if he suffered and died for our sins to bear our punishment in our place, and *if he rose from the dead*, then nothing is more certain than that there is not some other way to God and salvation. *God's way is in the nature of the case the only way!*

And the resurrection is the proof of that. Why should we believe in Jesus? Why should we trust in him, no matter our background, our nationality, our race, our religion, our socio-economic status; why, as Peter put it in v. 16, should we put *our* faith in *his* name? *Because he conquered death!* That's why! No one else has done that; no one else can.

Only Jesus ever did that. Only he ever claimed to have done that. Only he in ordinary human history, the history in which you and I are living today, rose to life from the dead and did so in a way that convinced a great number of people at the time and continues to convince an immense great number all over the world today. Some of those who believed at first were people of ordinary intelligence; some like the apostle Paul were people of extraordinary intelligence; some of them wanted to believe – they had known and loved the Lord Jesus before his death – but many who believed in Jesus and his resurrection were people for whom the thought of committing their lives to Jesus Christ had never so much as crossed their minds.

Only Jesus has actually demonstrated that he can give you what, as a human being, you most long for: *Life*. Life with a capital "L." Life that is happy, and full of love, useful to others, and pleasing to God; and life that does not have to end. Does it seem too good to be true? Is this simply wishful thinking on our part? I suppose we would all suspect that, except for this: *No one* was expecting Jesus to rise from the dead, *no one*, but multitudes came to realize that he had!

The one absolutely unanswerable reply to anyone who tells you that you *cannot* live happily forever, that you *cannot* live again after you have died, that you *cannot* find in another world what you have not found in this world is this: Jesus was a man and he lived again after he died, an extraordinarily higher and superior kind of human life, and, what is more, he promised that those who trust in him will do as he did.

Wouldn't you love to have known Jesus of Nazareth, unquestionably the most important, the most influential person who ever lived. The astonishing claim that Christians make is that *you can know him*; the very same Jesus who lived in the world so long ago, lives still today and makes himself known to those who seek him with an honest heart. *That is what Easter is all about*. The proclamation of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose again to give eternal life to all who trust in him. Put *your* faith in *his* name as many of us

have done. No one who has ever done so has ever regretted doing so; not one; not even one. Why is that? Because Jesus really did rise from the dead. He has risen indeed!