

“The Resurrection: a Review”

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

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On this Easter evening, I want to remind you of facts and considerations of which you are no doubt aware, but, if your experience is anything like mine, you think about too little, and without as much commitment of mind and heart as they deserve. We confess the great articles of our faith in worship every Sunday, and from time to time, we have occasion to think about them more carefully and more seriously. Easter is certainly one of those occasions with respect to the resurrection of the Lord; funerals are another. But it is hardly a secret that our worst problem as Christians, yours and mine, is that we so easily come to take for granted the most astonishing, breathtaking, and life-altering things; the very things that, taken to heart, are to power our Christian lives.

Are we not all of us laid bare by the observation of the Scottish Reformation preacher, Robert Bruce. “If you and I were both persuaded that there were a hell, we would do otherwise than we do.” Well, we believe that hell exists; we really do. But, alas, we also know it is not as obvious as it ought to be, that we take with full seriousness the fact that hell is a real place, a real condition, and a real destiny for vast multitudes.

Well, so it is with the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is, I think, perhaps the greatest public event in the history of the world, and a thing that changed and still changes *everything* for human beings, if only they would stop and think; if only they were willing to review the evidence with an open and honest mind, if only they were ready to consider the implications of this fact of history. But that is also true, far too true, of you and of me. The resurrection ought to be sending chills up and down our spine every day, for all that it means for us.

Don’t you suppose—I do—that those who were the first witnesses of the resurrection—the women, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the Twelve minus Judas, perhaps more of that community of the Lord’s closest followers who are unmentioned in the gospel narratives, certainly the more than 500 who saw him alive again in Galilee—I say, don’t you suppose that there was not a single day in the remainder of their lives in which they did not recollect what they saw and heard on that first Easter or over the next forty days, and in which they didn’t once again feel a shiver pass through them; a smile coming unbidden to their faces.

Surely, we should strive to be like them. Who can deny that? What a difference it would make in our lives if we were *alive* to the fact of the resurrection! What a difference it would make in the hour of temptation or in times of trouble or sorrow! And how it would sanctify our happiest times! Not simply an article of our creed, but always the life-altering event that it was and is. *And so this all too brief review this evening: considering first, the fact of the resurrection, and second, what it means for you, for me, and for every human being in the world.*

Now before I simply enumerate some of the evidence for the resurrection— enumerate only, there isn’t time to elaborate—let me say, before you begin to think I don’t know better, that we believe in the resurrection first and foremost because God has given us this faith; because we have within us the witness of the Holy Spirit, together with the Word of God that tells us what happened that

long ago Sunday morning. I also know that unbelievers, left to themselves, will never believe in the resurrection even in the face of overwhelming evidence, as so many refused to believe even when they knew full well that Jesus had risen from the dead. But that does not mean that there is not powerful, convincing evidence that leaves the unbelieving world without excuse and further encourages us to dismiss as very little the skepticism of the world, evidence that should strengthen our faith and increase our confidence. Augustine reminds us:

“No one believes anything unless one first thought it believable.... Everything that is believed is believed after being preceded by thought.... Not everyone who thinks believes, since many think in order not to believe, but everyone who believes thinks, thinks in believing and believes in thinking.” [*Predestination of the Saints*, 5]

So let's do a little thinking this Easter evening. Augustine himself, as you may remember, spent some years among the Manichees, who loved to deride Christian beliefs, but who, he came eventually to realize, had very little to offer in the way of explaining the world and were poor at providing convincing arguments for their own beliefs. In fact, they had thoroughly conventional minds, as do most of Christianity's despisers today. They don't think deeply or carefully; they are uninterested in hearing arguments that might undermine their confidence in their own beliefs, they believe what they want to believe and what many others around them believe. We have little to fear from them. So consider with me tonight some evidences for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, some of the reasons to believe that Christ's resurrection, however unique, however supernatural, however surpassing all other human experience, was an event in history; as much an event as the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate, the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, or the imperial reign of Tiberius. After Jesus' burial on Friday afternoon, he was alive again on Sunday morning, the self-same Jesus, the self-same body, but alive as no human being had ever been alive before. Most of the world was unaware, but multitudes would soon learn what had happened.

In making such an historical claim, the biblical faith is unique among the religions and philosophies of the world. The sort of history that appears in the authoritative texts of Hinduism and Buddhism is largely irrelevant to their teachings. But the Bible is very different. Its message *is* the history, the things that have happened in the world by which God proposes to save the human race. Without a doubt, the reason Christianity attracted followers when the other religions of the time lost theirs was because of these historical claims, because Christianity was not simply a set of ideas but an historical fact. So the sort of evidence we can cite for our faith.

First, the resurrection of the body *was not an idea whose time had come*. It was an intellectual offense against everything widely believed at that time. It contradicted the expectations of Jews for one reason and of Gentiles for another. The only reason such a message could have taken wing at that time, in that place, was because, to everyone's shock, it had actually happened. Scholars have looked for centuries for a source—religious, literary, cultural—to which they could pin the idea of the resurrection; some theory or practice which could be thought to have stimulated the imaginations of those who told the story in the first place, some idea abroad in the culture that led them to believe such a story. But they have not found it. The stories they used to tell about the mystery religions and pagan mythologies were so contrived and so unconvincing that no one trots them out any longer. This is the great virtue of N.T. Wright's great book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, an 800 page examination of the biblical account of the resurrection in the milieu of

first century Judaism and ancient and Greco-Roman paganism. Wright has buried, one hopes for good, the silliness that imagines that the account of the resurrection arose in a world of ideas ready to believe in such a thing. There are no antecedents for a resurrection of a body in the middle of history, no likely sources that the NT authors could have adapted to create such an account. It explodes, unanticipated, unexpected, a totally new thing on the world stage.

Second, the emphasis on eyewitness, sober, and compelling testimony is utterly unique among the world's religions' foundational texts. The Bible demands that we believe this for no other reason but that so many people were eyewitnesses of the risen Christ. Recent research has cast still further light on the importance of eyewitness testimony in the historical narratives of the New Testament. It was of vital importance for the authors of those narratives, and the commentary on them in the NT letters, to demonstrate that what they were claiming, what they were reporting, was *nothing* but what they had themselves seen and heard. It is one thing to report an event so utterly unexpected, unique, unheard of, and so obviously supernatural. It is another to admit that it was all of that, but that, nonetheless, it had to be reported because not one or two people, but many, had seen it for themselves. They weren't reporting someone else's story; they were giving their own personal testimony. "I was there; that is what happened." And not one or two, but dozens and then hundreds. No wonder their boldness; their confidence that no one could prove them wrong. The tomb was empty. They had found it empty. And the dead man was alive again, walking and talking among them!

Third, add to that this: As many have pointed out, the narrative of the resurrection we have in the New Testament bears none of the marks of religious mythical writing. It reads as history; it is deeply embedded in the personalities and political background of Judea in those early years of the first century. We are even told, at least in the terms familiar to those times, when the event occurred. Everything about it is plausible—the physical locations, the behavior of the Sanhedrin, of Pilate, of Herod, of both the Lord's trials, the conduct of the soldiers—everything is true to life. But it is the account of a resurrection. However implausible, this is what had happened. The narrative includes certain important features that would *never* have been part of a concocted account. The testimony of women, so prominent in the Gospel narratives, would have been thought to impeach the claims of Christ's resurrection, given the status of women in that time and place. They feature as largely as they do because *that also is what happened*. It is for such reasons that one apologist for the biblical account of the resurrection, described it as "the best attested fact of history. The rock from which all the hammers of criticism have not chipped a single fragment." [Thomas Arnold]

Fourth, there is the conversion of Saul. The Apostle Paul is now known to us as one of the most learned and intelligent men of the world of his day. His personality shines through his letters; they reveal the man. His writings have changed the world. How do unbelieving scholars account for the transformation of Paul's entire outlook on life? How do they explain how a man so determined to exterminate the fledgling movement became its greatest champion? You may be surprised to learn that they hardly ever make a serious attempt to do so. All the explanations for Paul's dramatic about-face are so preposterous and unconvincing on their face that hardly anyone attempts an explanation anymore: a hallucination, a psychological break, and so on. The fact of the matter is that there is only one serious explanation for the history of Paul, one of the greatest and most influential men ever to have lived in this world, and that is the explanation he himself gave, four

times in his own words. He saw the risen Christ, who spoke to him, confronted him, and summoned him there on the road between Jerusalem and Damascus.

Fifth, there is *the worship of Jesus as God* that begins almost immediately after his death and the end of his ministry. During the ministry the Gospels record that his disciples believed him to have come *from* God. But before the resurrection there is no unambiguous confession of Jesus *as* God himself. But the resurrection changed all of that. And it must have been an event of supreme power and tremendous impact to lead Jews, with monotheism in their bones, to begin worshipping a man as God himself and God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That impetus was provided by the resurrection, and it is hard to imagine anything less leading to the same stupendous result. The resurrection gave us the Holy Trinity, which, once again, no one was prepared for beforehand.

I could go on and on. Believe me, I have only scratched the surface of the evidence. The unbeliever, especially in the western world, imagines that he can explain life, and his own life, without reference to God. But we know that he cannot. He is comfortable not bothering to consider this evidence because he believes that science has now proven that the world and all the life in it is a gigantic accident. He is under no obligation to consider such religious claims, especially a claim as undeniably supernatural as is the resurrection. But “science,” so called, has proved nothing of the sort. People know, the scientists know, that the fossil record does not support the theory of the evolution of life in small increments over vast periods of time. The fossil intermediates—all the animals somewhat between the fish and the amphibian, between the amphibian and the reptile, between the reptile and the bird, and so on—I say, they know that those intermediates, those intermediates Darwin admitted in his own day, had to be there, if his theory were true, are not there; not there after almost 200 years of furious fossil-hunting. And they also know that the gap, indeed, the chasm between chemistry and life has grown vastly larger as more has been learned about the nature of the simplest living cell; a device so wonderful, so complex, so ingenious that no one has the faintest idea how such a thing might have come to be by accident or how the first living cell, that could reproduce itself, might have appeared willy-nilly and then, over time, become the profusion of life as we know it, including ourselves. They know what the fossils don’t show; they know the stupefying complexity of the simplest cell; they know these things and many more that might reasonably be understood to be the formal disproof or refutation of the theory that life came to exist without God.

But they believe it nevertheless, because they must. Because the entire history of human thought demonstrates how fiercely people will believe what they *want* to be true, what they *need* to be true. They have staked much more than their reputation on its being true. They cannot give it up and will not. Their theory frees them from having to face such facts as we are considering this evening.

All of this evidence can be elaborated in much greater detail and made in that way even more convincing. But we must make an end of this part of our review. But carry away with you this evening this conviction. To believe in the bodily resurrection of the Lord is no leap in the dark; it is not wishful thinking; it is certainly nothing like faith in defiance of the evidence. The case for the resurrection of Jesus is the sort of evidence that has been making believers out of skeptics for a very long time and will continue to do so to the end of the world. We are not the ones who must park our brains at the door in order to believe what we believe! It is for this reason that the earliest preachers of the gospel, preaching as they did to people at the very same time and in the very same

place, people who had themselves witnessed the ministry of Jesus, made his resurrection the focal point of their message. All the authorities had to do to put an end to all of this was produce the body or to falsify the story that was being told. This they could not do, and apparently thousands upon thousands of people soon realized that almost at once. But now, with the evidence for its historicity behind us, let us review what the resurrection of Jesus Christ *means*; means for you and me, and means for the world.

First, it means that the cross, Christ's death on *the cross*, was, indeed, as he said it would be and as his apostles said it had been, *the salvation of the world*. People saw the Messiah die on the cross. But nothing they saw could prove that he was, at that time and in that way, bearing the sins of the world, suffering our punishment in our place. It was the resurrection, his living again, his being seen and heard, that was the demonstration that what he had done of the cross was what he had said he would do: "give his life a ransom for many." It was the verification of everything he had ever said. It was the sign and seal of every promise he had made. It was the proof that he was no mere man, but that he was God, now come as a man into his world to save his people from their sins. Why should we believe that he alone is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him? Because he alone, of all human beings in the history of the world, rose from the dead to new and eternal human life.

Second, the resurrection was not only part of the accomplishment of our salvation, it was the grandest picture of that salvation. For what the resurrection means is that what happened to Jesus upon *his* death will happen as well *to all* who trust in him. Like all the miracles of the Lord, they not only demonstrated his power to save, but the nature of the salvation he had come to give us. His salvation heals us of all that is wrong with us: it overcomes our blindness to the truth, it enables us to hear the voice of God when we were deaf to it before, it empowers us to walk with him when before, in the spiritual paralysis of our lives, we neither would nor could. And supremely it demonstrates that he could give us life, wonderful, perfect human life, on the other side of the grave. He himself said that he was the resurrection and the life and that those who believe in him would live even though they die, and, in fact, they would never die; not really. Death would simply usher them into that fulness of life that all human beings crave but cannot and will not find in this world.

The most important thing about you as you sit here in this sanctuary this evening, what matters about your life more than anything else, is that you will live forever. Or, better, you will exist in conscious life as a human being forever. But, in Christ, by faith in him, by following him, you will *live* forever, *live* as we know we were made to live. He came that we might have life and have it to the full. Everyone will *exist* forever as conscious human beings; but only through Christ can we *live* forever: live in fellowship with God, live in love, live in goodness, live making the very most of all that we were created to be and to do. Live where everlasting joy crowns everyone's head. Is life simply an accident? Is our life only the temporary existence of higher order animals? Is it really "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die?"

Is this the whole sad story of creation,
Told by its toiling millions o'er and o'er,
One glimpse of day, then black annihilation,
A sunlit journey to a sunless shore?

No! There are a hundred reasons to know that is not the story of human life. But the finest reason, the most undeniable reason is that the one who promised us eternal life with himself, the one who promised that he had gone before us to prepare a place for us so that where he was we could be also; *that* man died but then rose alive again, the first fruits of those who sleep, which is to say, he rose again that we might as well.

But now, consider. It is not enough to say that Jesus Christ was crucified. Paul teaches us that we must also say that I was crucified with Christ, because he was on the cross for me, in my place. And, in the same way, it is not enough to say that Christ is risen. One must also say that I rose with him. That is what faith in Christ does: it makes us participants in his victory over sin and death.

Because I am in Christ by faith, what he did for me I will someday do. I will come out of the grave, and I will live with a new body in new and perfect human life. Strange as it seems to me to say it, I am almost 74 years of age. I can tell you something that you who are younger than I, many of you much younger, may think you know, but you really don't. I can tell you how swiftly the years pass; how soon they will be gone. And then what? Well, we know what! Then paradise, and then resurrection, and then and forever the life we were made to live, body and soul.

And meantime, Christ with us; the same Christ who came out of the tomb, never leaving us; never forsaking us; but accompanying us, by his Holy Spirit, every step of the way. That was his promise to us after his resurrection: "I will be with you always," a promise he could not have made unless he was alive again, never again to die.

I re-read again recently Paul Johnson's short but sparkling biography of Socrates, the 5th century B.C. Greek philosopher. As you may remember, Socrates was condemned to death by the citizens of Athens in 399 B.C. He had done nothing deserving of death, his trial was political theater, and his sentence was, to a great extent, designed to exact some revenge on men who were already dead and had had some connection to Socrates in years past. In other words, he was blamed for the sins of others. The ruling party needed a victim and Socrates fit the bill as well as anyone else. His guilt was guilt by association. He could have escaped the death sentence but made no effort to do so because such an effort, he believed, would have been cowardly and inconsistent with his loyalty to Athens and its form of government, however unjust its operation in this particular case. So, there was some real nobility in the death of Socrates. He was, of course, immensely important to the history of philosophy, as a result of his teaching, in the form of dialogues, later written and published by his disciple Plato. And he was a figure of special interest to early Christianity because of his monotheism, a minority view in polytheistic Greece of the 5th century B.C. In Athens those days those condemned to die were required to drink poison and to take the poison themselves, which Socrates did.

But what caught my attention was Paul Johnson's meditation on the man's death. Socrates was nothing if he was not a thinker and he thought a great deal about death. He would have agreed with the 20th century philosopher and author, Albert Camus, who famously said that "suicide is philosophy's only problem." Camus struggled to find any meaning in life, and concluded that no one could find it until and unless he or she had solved the problem of death. Life is one thing if it

is extinguished at death; it is another if there is something beyond. Johnson admires Socrates because, unlike so much later philosophy, his was concerned with the questions that matter most to ordinary human beings and, of course, death is the most important of all of those questions. Then, says, Paul Johnson,

“Despite all the efforts of doctors and scientists, psychologists, poets, painters, musicians, and other imaginative creators of genius, death remains as great a mystery to us now as it did to Socrates’ contemporaries 2,500 years ago. In knowledge of death we have not advanced one centimeter in all that time. Our perception of life to come, if there is any, is no more vivid. If anything, cloudier. But thanks to Socrates—and to Plato for recording him—we have at least learned, if we choose, to approach death and an unknown future with decorum, courage, and honor.”

What makes that remark so bizarre and so infuriating is that Johnson considered himself to be a Christian; he even speaks about Christ in the final chapter of his book. Socrates assumed that God would deal justly with him, and, in his view, that meant that God would comfort his soul (his body, of course, would not accompany him to the next world). This was the Socrates who once said, “I have never knowingly harmed any man, or sinned against God.” [Johnson, 111] However we may admire Socrates for certain traits of thought and life, he was a man, like all men, who thought far better of himself than he should have, and who knew very little of the holiness of God or the sinfulness of man. He had no sense whatever that he needed a Savior.

In any case, Socrates did not know what we know. He did not know that the one human being, who was also the Creator of heaven and earth, God the Son, would come from heaven to give his life a ransom for many and then would rise again and promise the same resurrection to all who trust in him. Our knowledge of death has not advanced one centimeter since 399 B.C? Our perception of life to come is no more vivid than in Socrates’ time? Really?

By all means, let us face our death with decorum, courage, and honor. But still much more with faith and knowledge. We are Christians. We know the history of the Christ, the incarnate God, who lived, died, and rose again and, in so doing, revealed the future of all who trust in him. We know precisely what will happen when we die; we know precisely what lies beyond the grave. We know that we too have resurrection in our future. *That* is what Christ’s resurrection means and *that* is a wonder beyond the power of words to describe. Not a day should go by without at least one thought of that long ago Sunday morning and the similar day that lies in our future, yours and mine.

I shall sleep sound in Jesus,
 Fill’d with his likeness rise,
 To live and to adore him,
 To see him with these eyes.
 ‘Tween me and resurrection
 But Paradise doth stand;
 Then – then for glory dwelling
 In Immanuel’s land.