

12. PRACTICING RESURRECTION



FOCUS: While much has been made of Jesus' literal and physical resurrection being the core historical event of Christianity, the Biblical texts themselves present conflicting evidence. For many today, the resuscitation of Jesus' body is less important than the idea of resurrection as a credible and meaningful principle for living.

RESURRECTIONS OF JESUS

"...and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain."

– Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:14

Even as Jesus' virgin birth and healing miracles are embraced as metaphor, the resurrection remains for many the one core, non-negotiable, and historical fact at the heart of Christianity. Yet the only way one can maintain an unquestioning literal interpretation of the events surrounding that first Easter is by steadfastly avoiding the reading of the Bible.

Paul, author of our earliest New Testament writings, tells us nothing of the third day's events jumbled together later by the gospel writers. Instead, he opts for trying to explain the "idea" of resurrection to the Corinthians with a tortured discourse on its importance. Evidently having been asked *how* a body is raised, Paul bursts out in response with "You fool!" before explaining that "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." (1 Corinthians 15:44) Nowhere does Paul speak of Jesus' body having been resuscitated or of his having interacted with the disciples as he is portrayed twenty to fifty years later in the gospels. He does, however, proclaim that regardless of the details, the events of Easter reversed the outcome of humanity's actions and character. He attributes knowledge of this to Jesus having appeared in visions to select witnesses – himself included.

As Paul died before any of the gospels were written, he never had a chance to read any of the various accounts. If he had, he would have undoubtedly written a letter of protest over their many inconsistencies.

Starting with our earliest gospel, Mark, the Risen Christ fails to make an appearance. Mark's abrupt and unexpected ending verges on the anti-climactic: the women find the tomb empty, are instructed by a young man to tell the disciples to go to Galilee to meet Jesus, but instead scatter in fear and tell no one anything. That's it. The end. No angels, no soldiers and no Jesus appearances. Such a cliffhanger was simply too much for later writers, so over the years a

variety of new endings were written to “flesh out” Mark’s unsatisfactory finish. Several of these now appear in most Bibles as footnotes or as the “shorter” and “longer” endings of Mark. So we’re left with the account written closest to the action being woefully short on any of the details we’ve come to associate with Easter.

As Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels some fifteen to twenty years later, they each had a copy of Mark in front of them. We know this because they copy much of Mark almost verbatim. What is interesting is what they choose to change about the stories to reflect other information they might have had or to fit into their own theological agendas.

Even a casual reading of Matthew and Luke reveals a number of changes: Mark’s young man is transformed into a supernatural angel in Matthew – and two angels in Luke! Matthew has the women embracing the resuscitated body of Jesus at the tomb and appearing to the disciples out of the sky on a Galilean mountaintop. Luke places the action in Jerusalem and not in Galilee. Although Luke’s Jesus can appear and disappear seemingly out of thin air, he also does his best to prove he is not a ghost by eating, teaching, and having the disciples investigate his wounds. Matthew doesn’t feel a need to explain how the risen Jesus, at some point, is no longer with the disciples. But Luke, still centered in Jerusalem and in a dramatic preparation for his sequel, *Acts*, introduces the story of the Ascension. But even Luke is inconsistent, placing the Ascension on Easter itself in his gospel account but forty days later in *Acts*.

The moving account in John enhances the physical nature of Jesus’ body even further with Mary mistaking him for a simple gardener and Jesus having to insist that she not “cling” to him. Jesus ascends at this point only to appear to the disciples later that night in the Upper Room. A week later he appears to the disciples again, this time to upbraid “doubting” Thomas (and any readers of like mind) for their lack of faith. In a much later Galilean appearance, the disciples have returned to their nets. Jesus materializes to direct them in a great catch of fish and ends by empowering Peter to be on about feeding his lambs. John ends by assuring readers that:

“... there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

– John 21:25

The above seems especially true when considering the resurrection accounts, according to which Jesus did many things and events transpired that were mutually exclusive of one another. As we become familiar with the texts themselves, it’s obvious that stories developed over time and that none of the accounts can be claimed as definitive – or historical.

Yet *something* happened in the days following the crucifixion that transformed the disciples from uncertain followers to heralds of the Jesus message, evidently

willing to die for their convictions. While we will never know the details of how the Jesus of their daily lives became the Christ presence of their future, the gospel accounts are testimony to people's hunger to know more.

Although painfully obvious, the inconsistencies of the gospel accounts have proven oddly insignificant to generations of believers. Through willful ignorance or just plain not paying attention, the stories of this supposedly ultimate and defining moment of the faith have been synthesized into supporting various notions of resurrection as a physically resuscitated body. Looking back through the lenses of time and tradition, it's clear to see how even Paul is now almost impossible to read without the influence of the later gospels distorting and redefining his original meaning.

"...Thomas did not believe the resurrection [John 20:25], and, as they say, would not believe without having ocular and manual demonstration himself. So neither will I, and the reason is equally as good for me, and for every other person, as for Thomas."

– Thomas Paine, *Age Of Reason*

Whatever happened in the days following the crucifixion, the followers of Jesus were propelled into a new way of living and relating to this Galilean peasant they had been following. They were compelled to re-evaluate their Jewish heritage in ways that accounted for their experience of Jesus, both in his temporal life and as a spiritual presence in the present.

With only the gospel accounts as our guide, we, too, are left to re-evaluate our heritage in ways that account for the clearly non-historical resurrection stories and our experiences of a spiritual presence we call the Christ.

SEEING EASTER THROUGH

"You can't go on seeing through things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that a window is transparent but the point is that we should see the street or the garden beyond."

– C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*

On a side street in Jerusalem, a garden tomb is maintained as an example of 1st century tombs and a destination for pilgrims. It is hewn out of rock with a track for a disk-shaped stone to be rolled over the door. A rolling stone was important, because burial in those days was not what we practice today. At most, the body was in the tomb for a year or so as nature reduced it to bones. The bones were then removed and placed in an "Ossuary," or bone box. Much has been made in recent years of the discovery of such bone boxes tied to Jesus' brother, James, and other family members. But ossuaries and stones aside, what do we do with the image of an empty tomb? With five different Biblical interpretations of resurrection, we STILL don't know what really happened.

Bertrand Russell said, “Easter is a fiction to comfort the faithful. It is a courtesy of the church for the gullible.” With all the discrepancies and differences in the text, there is ample evidence for those of similar temperament to look at Easter and easily see through it all. For many of these folks, it’s OK to see the stories as simply stories.

But the vast majority of believers are conditioned to embrace only the most simplistic and superficial view of Easter. The *whole* story is an inconvenience getting in the way of the triumphal and happy ending. For those whose faith is dependent on a literal, physical resuscitation of Jesus’ body, any suggestion to the contrary is tantamount to heresy. In fact, those teachings about loving enemies or returning good for evil aren’t really that attractive, either.

But wherever one finds oneself, seeing through it all or seeing only what is convenient, the question remains: can we see it through? Regardless of how transparent the stories are as stories, regardless of any fixation on just the happy part of the story, what do we see “beyond?” What do we take with us into our life and relationships?

Jesus’ parables are rarely about religion. They’re not really about the next life either. They’re more about everyday life and relationships. They seem to suggest that God intends us to take one world at a time, and make something of it. A “see it through” Easter faith is one which grapples with daily life, which brings Jesus back to life by caring about what happens to others. Not just to a spouse, a child, an aged parent, or a colleague, but to someone whom we don’t know – better yet, to someone we don’t like at all.

PRACTICING RESURRECTION

While many limit resurrection to a miraculous event that happened to Jesus long ago and that will in some distant future be the fate of true believers, as well, such literal interpretations have ceased to have meaning for many rational, faithful, and even mystically oriented Christians today. The followers of Osiris, Attis, Mithra, and the many other resurrected gods have recognized and celebrated resurrection in various ways over the centuries. Today, the metaphor of resurrection stands for many Christians as a symbol of the call to new life, as an appeal to practice resurrection here and now.

The reality of the human condition leaves many “entombed” by their attitudes, circumstances, or life choices. Metaphorical “rocks” are everywhere: the rock of disappointment, of insecurity, of poverty, or of guilt. We’re often sealed in by the rocks of arrogance, confusion, addiction, or indifference. Our eyes adjust to the darkness of the tombs we choose. Almost anything that stands between a person and the transforming presence of the Divine can be seen as a stone in need of being rolled away.

Perhaps one of the largest stones in need of being rolled away is the popular Christian notion of what life after death means for the individual believer. The idea that worthy believers will somehow be resuscitated in another, more paradisiacal life is the conventional wisdom expressed at most every funeral in Western culture. With roots in ancient mystery religions and beliefs developed by the Pharisees, grieving loved ones, those preparing to die for “a cause,” or those who are forced to endure hardships in this life are assured that there is a better life somewhere beyond this mortal coil.

As the Jewish sect of the Saducees did not hold to a belief in a general resurrection, Matthew casts them in a story proposing a hypothetical resurrection question to Jesus: If a woman is married multiple times in succession because each of her husbands dies, whose wife will she be in heaven? In dismissing the question, Jesus seems clear that any of our earthly categories of identity or being cease to have meaning beyond this life:

“For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.”

– Matthew 22:30

Regardless of how little Biblical evidence there is for popular ideas of life after death, many people take comfort in the simplistic idea that they will somehow “be with” their loved ones in the next life. This idea has become so fixated in the minds of many faithful that it could often be perceived as the primary reason people claim an allegiance to Christianity. As such, it becomes a major obstacle in understanding any deeper meaning of resurrection – and to the living of one’s life in the present.

Whatever perspective one has on life after death, the eternal is not something off in some vague, unknowable, distant future. Whatever the eternal might be, it begins *here* as part of who we are today. The message of resurrection is new life *now*.

*“Practice resurrection.
Part of who you are is who you will be.”*

– Wendell Berry, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*

DON'T BE AFRAID TO LIVE

As motivation to live every moment to its fullest, Socrates exhorted his followers to practice dying as the highest form of wisdom. Such immediacy can radically change one’s world and teaches the importance of reevaluating priorities. In his book, *A Year to Live: How to live this year as if it were your last*, counselor Steven Levine put his experience with hospice patients to the test. His daily encounters with those who had been given a terminal diagnosis revealed to him people with transformed lives. Their perspective on life changed, their priorities were re-ordered, and many of the circumstances and choices that had crippled them before their diagnosis evaporated into new life. Levine set a date for his own death and lived as if he would die on that day. His book is the record of his

radical experiment to get a glimpse of that transformation for himself. In so doing, he gave himself permission to address his unfinished business and enter into a new and vibrant relationship with life. He gained a new appreciation for the need to live each moment mindfully, as if it were all that was left.

“The message of the resurrection is not simply, ‘don’t be afraid to die.’ Surely it is that. And all of us when we lose someone we love, or on our own day of dying will need the comfort of the resurrection. But I believe the message of Easter is not simply ‘don’t be afraid to die,’ but ‘don’t be afraid to live.’”

– DeWayne Zimmerman

Life is precious. It’s to be shared with generosity. The gospels are clear about this. What should also be clear is that resurrection isn’t just limited to the experience of Jesus or to however we understand a life after death, but in passing from death to life here and now. The message of resurrection and of Easter hope is that we can live fully in *this* life, giving of ourselves, and risking for love’s sake.

Help someone who’s hurting. Open the eyes of love for someone who is blind. Free a captive. Heal a wound. Feed someone who is hungry. Give the gift of yourself – for the gift of who we are was given to us in order to be given away.

An aging pious man, Rabbi Susya, became fearful as death drew near. His friends chided him, "What! Are you afraid that you'll be reproached that you weren't Moses?" "No," the rabbi replied, "that I was not Susya. "

The secret to practicing resurrection is in giving who we are and what we have completely, wholly away to something greater than ourselves – in escaping from the circumstances and choices that entomb us and entering into new life here and now. In life and in death, Jesus modeled this generosity and transformation for followers then and now. As we embrace resurrection as a credible and meaningful principle for living, we, like Jesus, may become more than anyone around us – or even we ourselves – could have imagined.

“You can live it, you can embody it. As Gandhi used to say, ‘Embody the change you seek.’ Embody it.”

– Helen Prejean,
LtQ’s Questioning Capital Punishment

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

What evidence points to the physical resurrection of Jesus being a legendary, late-developing tradition?

How would making the resurrection about believing “some extraordinary thing that’s against all natural laws” not make any sense to pre-enlightenment pagans?

How would Paul have demonstrated the benefit of the resurrection to his listeners?

DVD Chapter 3:

Why is the resurrection of Jesus “the most radical idea that humans have ever come up with?”

DVD Chapter 4:

The disciples have to 1) put together the message of the kingdom with 2) the experiences of Jesus’ appearances before what could happen?

According to Varghese, how does the resurrection support the work God calls us to do?

Why does the power of resurrection “upset entrenched authority of any kind?”

How is resurrection more than simply victory over death – or even the spiritualized notions of sin and evil?

When considering Jesus’ death and resurrection, how does the notion of the spirit of Jesus dwelling in us strengthen us for new life in the here and now?

How is “the expenditure of our life for the community” a form of the resurrected life?

SPIRITPRACTICE: “Spiritual Autobiographies”

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

Be sure to follow up on this session's theme with Session 12's *Living it Out: "Coming to Life"* distributed by your facilitator.