

THIRTEEN

THE REALITY OF THE
RESURRECTION

My question—that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide—was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man . . . a question without an answer to which one cannot live. It was: “What will come of what I am doing today or tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?” It can also be expressed thus: Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?

—Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*

WHEN I was studying philosophy and religion in college, I was taught that the resurrection of Jesus was a major historical problem, no matter how you looked at it. Most modern historians made the philosophical assumption that miracles simply cannot happen, and that made the claim of the resurrection highly problematic. However, if you disbelieved the resurrection you then had the difficulty of explaining how the Christian church got started at all.

Several years ago I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. It was treatable and was removed successfully with surgery and other therapy. However, to paraphrase Samuel Johnson, the “cancer” word pronounced over you under any circumstances concentrates the mind

wonderfully. During my treatment I discovered N. T. Wright’s *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, the latest historical scholarship on Jesus’s resurrection. I read it with great attention. It became quite clear to me how much more than a historical, philosophical issue this was. It is that, but it is much more. If it happened, it changes our lives completely.

Sometimes people approach me and say, “I really struggle with this aspect of Christian teaching. I like this part of Christian belief, but I don’t think I can accept that part.” I usually respond: “If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all he said; if he didn’t rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead.” That is how the first hearers felt who heard reports of the resurrection. They knew that if it was true it meant we can’t live our lives any way we want. It also meant we don’t have to be afraid of anything, not Roman swords, not cancer, nothing. If Jesus rose from the dead, it changes everything.

Did he? Let’s look at the reasons and evidence, the arguments and counterarguments.

Most people think that, when it comes to Jesus’s resurrection, the burden of proof is on believers to give evidence that it happened. That is not completely the case. The resurrection also puts a burden of proof on its nonbelievers. It is not enough to simply believe Jesus did not rise from the dead. You must then come up with a historically feasible alternate explanation for the birth of the church. You have to provide some other plausible account for how things began. Most people who don’t believe the resurrection of Jesus really happened offer something like the following scenario for Christian beginnings.

People at that time, it is said, did not have our scientific knowledge about the world. They were credulous about magical and

supernatural happenings. They could easily have fallen prey to reports of a risen Jesus, because they believed that resurrections from the dead were possible. Jesus’s followers were heartbroken when he was killed. Since they believed he was the Messiah, they may have begun to sense that he was still with them, guiding them, living on in their hearts in spirit. Some may have even felt they had visions of him speaking to them. Over the decades these feelings of Jesus living on spiritually developed into stories that he had been raised physically. The resurrection accounts in the four gospels were devised to bolster this belief.

The alternate account proposed in the preceding paragraph sounds plausible to the average contemporary person, but only because we are ignorant of the historical and cultural context.

The Empty Tomb and the Witnesses

The first fallacy in the alternate account is the claim that the resurrection narratives in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John must have been developed later, long after the events themselves. It is argued that the two main features of these texts—the empty tomb and the eyewitnesses—were fabrications. That can’t be true.

The first accounts of the empty tomb and the eyewitnesses are not found in the gospels, but in the letters of Paul, which every historian agrees were written just fifteen to twenty years after the death of Jesus. One of the most interesting texts is 1 Corinthians 15:3-6:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to

Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have died.

Here Paul not only speaks of the empty tomb and resurrection on the “third day” (showing he is talking of a historical event, not a symbol or metaphor) but he also lists the eyewitnesses. Paul indicates that the risen Jesus not only appeared to individuals and small groups, but he also appeared to five hundred people at once, most of whom were still alive at the time of his writing and could be consulted for corroboration. Paul’s letter was to a church, and therefore it was a public document, written to be read aloud. Paul was inviting anyone who doubted that Jesus had appeared to people after his death to go and talk to the eyewitnesses if they wished. It was a bold challenge and one that could easily be taken up, since during the *pax Romana* travel around the Mediterranean was safe and easy. Paul could not have made such a challenge if those eyewitnesses didn’t exist.

Another important feature of this text is that Paul insists that he was faithfully recounting the testimony that had been handed to him. Critical scholars from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries assumed the early Christians would have used a process for transmitting popular folktales that altered tales in the telling, like a cultural version of the children’s game “Whisper Down the Valley.” As I noted in Chapter 6, however, more recent anthropological studies show that ancient cultures clearly distinguish between fictional stories and historical accounts in transmission. Historical accounts were not allowed to be changed.¹ That is what Paul is claiming, that the reports of the resurrection he conveys were taken intact from the mouths of the people who actually saw Jesus.

Additionally, the accounts of the resurrection in the Bible were too problematic to be fabrications. Each gospel states that the first

eyewitnesses to the resurrection were women. Women’s low social status meant that their testimony was not admissible evidence in court. There was no possible advantage to the church to recount that all the first witnesses were women. It could only have undermined the credibility of the testimony. The only possible explanation for why women were depicted as meeting Jesus first is if they really had. N. T. Wright argues that there must have been enormous pressure on the early proclaimers of the Christian message to remove the women from the accounts. They felt they could not do so—the records were too well known.² The accounts of the first eyewitnesses of the resurrection would have been electrifying and life-changing, passed along and retold more than any other stories about the life of Jesus.

Also, as Wright argues, the empty tomb and the accounts of personal meetings with Jesus are even more historically certain when you realize they must be taken together. If there had been only an empty tomb and no sightings, no one would have concluded it was a resurrection. They would have assumed that the body had been stolen. Yet if there had been only eyewitness sightings of Jesus and no empty tomb, no one would have concluded it was a resurrection, because people’s accounts of seeing departed loved ones happen all the time. Only if the two factors were both true together would anyone have concluded that Jesus was raised from the dead.³

Paul’s letters show that Christians proclaimed Jesus’s bodily resurrection from the very beginning. That meant the tomb *must* have been empty. No one in Jerusalem would have believed the preaching for a minute if the tomb was not empty. Skeptics could have easily produced Jesus’s rotted corpse. Also, Paul could not be telling people in a public document that there were scores of eyewitnesses alive if there were not. We can’t permit ourselves the luxury of thinking that the resurrection accounts were only fabricated

years later. Whatever else happened, the tomb of Jesus must have really been empty and hundreds of witnesses must have claimed that they saw him bodily raised.

Resurrection and Immortality

There is, therefore, very strong evidence that the tomb was empty and there were hundreds of people who claimed they saw the risen Christ. That much is “historically secure,” as Wright puts it. “But surely,” someone can respond, “that doesn’t prove Jesus was really resurrected. Surely the followers desperately wanted to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. If anyone had stolen the body in order to make it look like he had been raised, many sincere people could have thought they’d seen him, and maybe a few others went along with saying so for a good cause.”

The assumption behind this very common hypothesis is a form of what C. S. Lewis has called “chronological snobbery.” We imagine that we modern people take claims of a bodily resurrection with skepticism, while the ancients, full of credulity about the supernatural, would have immediately accepted it. That is not the case. To all the dominant worldviews of the time, an individual bodily resurrection was almost inconceivable.

N. T. Wright does an extensive survey of the non-Jewish thought of the first-century Mediterranean world, both east and west, and reveals that the universal view of the people of that time was that a bodily resurrection was impossible. Why? In Greco-Roman thinking, the soul or spirit was good and the physical and material world was weak, corrupt, and defiling. To them the physical, by definition, was always falling apart and therefore salvation was conceived as *liberation* from the body. In this worldview resurrection was not only impossible, but totally undesirable. No soul, having gotten free from its body, would ever want it back. Even those who be-

lieved in reincarnation understood that the return to embodied life meant that the soul was not yet out of its prison. The goal was to get free of the body forever. Once your soul is free of its body, a return to re-embodied life was outlandish, unthinkable, and impossible.⁴

The report of Jesus’s resurrection would have also have been unthinkable to the Jews. Unlike the Greeks, the Jews saw the material and physical world as good. Death was not seen as liberation from the material world but as a tragedy. By Jesus’s day many Jews had come to hope that some day in the future there would be a bodily resurrection of all the righteous, when God renewed the entire world and removed all suffering and death.⁵ The resurrection, however, was merely one part of the complete renewal of the whole world, according to Jewish teaching. The idea of an individual being resurrected, in the middle of history, while the rest of the world continued on burdened by sickness, decay, and death, was inconceivable. If someone had said to any first-century Jew, “So-and-so has been resurrected from the dead!” the response would be, “Are you crazy? How could that be? Has disease and death ended? Is true justice established in the world? Has the wolf lain down with the lamb? Ridiculous!” The very idea of an individual resurrection would have been as impossible to imagine to a Jew as to a Greek.

Over the years, skeptics about the resurrection have proposed that the followers of Jesus may have had hallucinations, that they may have imagined him appearing to them and speaking to them. This assumes that their master’s resurrection was imaginable for his Jewish followers, that it was an option in their worldview. It was not. Others have put forth the conspiracy theory, that the disciples stole the body and claimed he was alive to others. This assumes that the disciples would expect other Jews to be open to the belief that an individual could be raised from the dead. But none of this is

possible. The people of that time would have considered a bodily resurrection to be as impossible as the people of our own time, though for different reasons.

In the first century there were many other messianic movements whose would-be messiahs were executed. However,

In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better. Resurrection was not a private event. Jewish revolutionaries whose leader had been executed by the authorities, and who managed to escape arrest themselves, had two options: give up the revolution, or find another leader. Claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not an option. Unless, of course, he was.⁶

There were dozens of other messianic pretenders whose lives and careers ended the same way Jesus's did. Why would the disciples of Jesus have come to the conclusion that that his crucifixion had not been a defeat but a triumph—unless they had seen him risen from the dead?

The Explosion of a New Worldview

After the death of Jesus the entire Christian community suddenly adopted a set of beliefs that were brand-new and until that point had been unthinkable. The first Christians had a resurrection-centered view of reality. They believed that the future resurrection had already begun in Jesus. They believed that Jesus had a transformed body that could walk through walls yet eat food. This was not simply a resuscitated body like the Jews envisioned, nor a solely spiritual existence like the Greeks imagined. Jesus's resurrection

guaranteed our resurrection and brought some of that future new life into our hearts now.⁷

As N. T. Wright points out, every one of these beliefs was unique in the world up to that time, but in every other instance that we know of, such a massive shift in thinking at the worldview level only happens to a group of people over a period of time.⁸ It ordinarily takes years of discussion and argument in which various thinkers and writers debate the “nature of the resurrection” until one side wins. That is how culture and worldviews change.

However, the Christian view of resurrection, absolutely unprecedented in history, sprang up full-blown immediately after the death of Jesus. There was no process or development. His followers said that their beliefs did not come from debating and discussing. They were just telling others what they had seen themselves. No one has come up with any plausible alternative to this claim. Even if you propose the highly unlikely idea that one or two of Jesus's disciples did get the idea that he was raised from the dead on their own, they would never have gotten a movement of other Jews to believe it unless there were multiple, inexplicable, plausible, repeated encounters with Jesus.

The subsequent history of the church gets even more difficult to account for. How could a group of first-century Jews have come to worship a human being as divine? Eastern religions believe that God is an impersonal force that permeates all things. Therefore they can accept the idea that some human beings have more divine consciousness than others. Western religions believed that the various gods often took human guise. It was possible, therefore, that some human figure could really be Zeus or Hermes. Jews, however, believed in a single, transcendent, personal God. It was absolute blasphemy to propose that any human being should be worshipped. Yet hundreds of Jews began worshipping Jesus literally overnight. The hymn to Christ as God that Paul quotes in Philippians 2 is

generally recognized to have been written just a few years after the crucifixion. What enormous event broke through all of that Jewish resistance? If they had seen him resurrected, that would account for it. What other historical answer can do so?

There is one more thing to keep in mind. As Pascal put it, “I [believe] those witnesses that get their throats cut.” Virtually all the apostles and early Christian leaders died for their faith, and it is hard to believe that this kind of powerful self-sacrifice would be done to support a hoax.

It is not enough for the skeptic, then, to simply dismiss the Christian teaching about the resurrection of Jesus by saying, “It just couldn’t have happened.” He or she must face and answer all these historical questions: Why did Christianity emerge so rapidly, with such power? No other band of messianic followers in that era concluded their leader was raised from the dead—why did this group do so? No group of Jews ever worshipped a human being as God. What led them to do it? Jews did not believe in divine men or individual resurrections. What changed their worldview virtually overnight? How do you account for the hundreds of eyewitnesses to the resurrection who lived on for decades and publicly maintained their testimony, eventually giving their lives for their belief?

The Challenge of the Resurrection

Nothing in history can be proven the way we can prove something in a laboratory. However, the resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact much more fully attested to than most other events of ancient history we take for granted. Every effort to account for the birth of the church apart from Jesus’s resurrection flies in the face of what we know about first-century history and culture. If you don’t short-circuit the process with the philosophical bias against the possibility of miracle, the resurrection of Jesus has the most evidence for it.

The problem is, however, that people *do* short-circuit the investigation. Instead of doing the work of answering these very tough historical questions and then following the answers where they lead, they bail out with the objection that miracles are impossible. N. T. Wright makes a scathing response:

The early Christians did not invent the empty tomb and the meetings or sightings of the risen Jesus. . . . Nobody was expecting this kind of thing; no kind of conversion experience would have invented it, no matter how guilty (or how forgiven) they felt, no matter how many hours they pored over the scriptures. To suggest otherwise is to stop doing history and enter into a fantasy world of our own.⁹

I sympathize with the person who says, “So what if I can’t think of an alternate explanation? The resurrection just couldn’t happen.” Let’s not forget, however, that first-century people felt exactly the same way. They found the resurrection just as inconceivable as you do. The only way anyone embraced the resurrection back then was by letting the evidence challenge and change their worldview, their view of what was possible. They had just as much trouble with the claims of the resurrection as you, yet the evidence—both of the eyewitness accounts and the changed lives of Christ’s followers—was overwhelming.

Each year at Easter I get to preach on the Resurrection. In my sermon I always say to my skeptical, secular friends that, even if they can’t believe in the resurrection, they should want it to be true. Most of them care deeply about justice for the poor, alleviating hunger and disease, and caring for the environment. Yet many of them believe that the material world was caused by accident and that the world and everything in it will eventually simply burn up in the death of the sun. They find it discouraging that so few people

care about justice without realizing that their own worldview undermines any motivation to make the world a better place. Why sacrifice for the needs of others if in the end nothing we do will make any difference? If the resurrection of Jesus happened, however, that means there’s infinite hope and reason to pour ourselves out for the needs of the world. In a sermon, N. T. Wright said:

The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice, and love have won . . . If Easter means Jesus Christ is only raised in a spiritual sense—[then] it is only about me, and finding a new dimension in my personal spiritual life. But if Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world—news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn’t just about warming hearts. Easter means that in a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things—and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement victory of Jesus over them all. Take away Easter and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christianity of ignoring problems of the material world. Take it away and Freud was probably right to say Christianity is wish-fulfillment. Take it away and Nietzsche probably was right to say it was for wimps.¹⁰