

## Resurrection Sunday 2011

The German scholar Rudolf Bultmann left an interesting legacy on the pages of 20<sup>th</sup> Century theology. He was known as “the father of demythologizing,” and he went through great pains to try to separate history from faith. Here is perhaps the most extreme example of his outlook: “If the bones of the dead Jesus were discovered tomorrow in a Palestinian tomb, all the essentials of Christianity would remain unchanged.” Many today would agree with him, but the apostle Paul would disagree:

**1 Cor 15:14-19 NKJV** <sup>14</sup>*And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. <sup>15</sup>Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. <sup>16</sup>For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. <sup>17</sup>And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! <sup>18</sup>Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup>If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.*

What is he saying? If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then:

1. Our preaching is empty.
2. Your faith is empty.
3. We are lying about God: We said that He raised Jesus from the dead when He did not.
4. Your faith is futile.
5. You are still in your sins.
6. Those who have fallen asleep (died) in Christ have perished.
7. Our hope is only for this life.
8. We are the most pitiable people in the world.

Clearly the Christian faith hinges on Christ’s resurrection. Every sermon preached by every Christian in the NT focused on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without the resurrection there is no Christianity. Still, many don’t really understand this event – including, it seems, certain scholars and theologians. So, today we’re going to answer three questions that all of us may have asked at one time or another.

- 1. What exactly do the NT writers mean when they say that Jesus rose from the dead?**
- 2. What evidence do we have that the NT writers were really telling the truth?**
- 3. What difference does it make whether I believe it?**

- 1. What exactly do the NT writers mean when they say that Jesus rose from the dead?**

The word the NT writers use for resurrection literally means “standing up again” or “standing on the feet again.” It speaks of a literal getting up again of Jesus’ body, meaning that it was still a physical body, but now raised, transformed, immortal. Christ’s body was a real body, but would no longer be subject to disease or decay. This means there are several ideas we need to rule out:

- A. The resurrected Christ is not a ghost.
- B. The resurrection is not just resuscitation, like the raising of Lazarus, or what happens to people in hospitals when they have near-death experiences, but live to tell about it afterward.

- C. Resurrection is not reincarnation, as if Jesus received another mortal body to live in.
- D. Resurrection is not simply immortality; where the soul is freed from the body but lives on in some immaterial form.
- E. Resurrection is not Enlightenment, Nirvana or *satori* or *moksha* – the kind of thing a Hindu or a Buddhist would look forward to at death.
- F. Resurrection is not a vision. We're talking about a literal, physical rising from the dead. The apostles touched the risen Jesus. The Gospels tell us that He walked with them down the road and ate with them on the beach.
- G. The resurrection is not a myth that is true in only some symbolic way. The tomb really was empty. In this sense I'm also in favor of demythologizing the story. It's not merely mythical, in the sense of being only symbolically true; it's historically true. Jesus is actually alive.

## **2. What evidence do we have that the NT writers were really telling the truth?**

- A. The burial by Joseph of Arimathea in his own tomb: All four Gospels mention this, saying that Joseph was wealthy and a prominent member of the council or Sanhedrin.
  - i. The Sanhedrin sentenced Jesus to death and persecuted the early church. The gospel writers would have no motivation for unanimously making one of the council members look good as a part of their early preaching.
  - ii. If Joseph was a fictional character, the story would have easily been discredited since the Sanhedrin were all well-known figures. It would be like trying to make up a congressman or a member of the state legislature – and Joseph was a “prominent” member of the council, meaning he was exceptionally well-known.
  - iii. If Joseph was real, but had no part in the burial, this would also be proven a lie and would have only fanned the flames of hatred that already existed between the council and the Christians.
    - There is no motivation for them to say this unless it happens to be the truth.
- B. The gospel writers record that women were the first to discover the empty tomb: They were the ones who then told the apostles. In that culture the testimony of women was not highly valued; for example, it was not allowed in court.
  - i. If this wasn't true, the apostles were making themselves look bad for not being the first to see the tomb. They were diminishing their own persuasive power.
  - ii. They were also de-valuing their story by giving that place to the women among Christ's followers – doubly diminishing their own persuasive power.

- Again, there is no motivation for them to say this unless it happens to be the truth.

C. There were multiple witnesses that saw the risen Jesus. Hear Paul in 1 Cor 15:

**1 Cor 15:3-8 NKJV** <sup>3</sup>For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup>and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup>and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. <sup>6</sup>After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup>After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. <sup>8</sup>Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

- The number of witnesses rules out any kind of hallucination, because this many people do not all hallucinate in the same way in various places at various times.
- The number of witnesses also rules out the possibility that Jesus didn't really die, but simply seemed to be dead. If Jesus were beaten to a bloody pulp, crucified and only rendered unconscious, he would not have emerged from the tomb with enough strength to convince this many followers that he was the actual son of God. He would have rather needed a nurse to treat his wounds.
- Further, this rules out a big fat lie or conspiracy, because Paul points out that many of the eyewitnesses were still alive while he was writing. Unless the story was true lie would not hold together in an environment of persecution.
- Thinking back on the Watergate scandal in his book, *Loving God*, Chuck Colson says:

*"With the most powerful office in the world at stake, a small band of hand-picked loyalists, no more than ten of us, could not hold a conspiracy together more than two weeks. ...*

*Yet, even the prospect of jeopardizing the President we'd worked so hard to elect, of losing the prestige, power, and personal luxury of our offices was not enough incentive to make this group of men contain a lie. Nor, as I reflect today, was the pressure really all that great. ... There was certain to be keen embarrassment; at the worst, some might go to prison; though that possibility was by no means certain. But no one was in grave danger; no one's life was at stake.*

*"Yet, after just a few weeks the natural human instinct for self-preservation was so overwhelming that the conspirators, one-by-one deserted their leader, walked away from their cause, turned their backs on the power, prestige, and privileges. ...*

*"This is why the Watergate experience is so instructive for me. If John Dean and the rest of us were so panic stricken, not by the prospect of beatings and execution, but by political disgrace and a possible prison term, one can only speculate about the emotions of the disciples. Unlike men in the White House, the disciples were powerless people, abandoned by their leader, homeless in a conquered land. Yet they clung tenaciously to their enormously offensive story that their leader had risen from his ignoble death and was alive -- and was the Lord!*

*"Take it from one who was inside the Watergate web looking out, who saw firsthand how vulnerable a cover-up is: nothing less than a witness as awesome as the resurrected Christ could have caused those men to maintain to their dying whispers that Jesus is alive and the Lord." (Find *Loving God* on [Google Books](#), see pp.67-69)*

### 3. What difference does it make whether or not I believe it?

A. If you remain a skeptic you have to come up with a better explanation for the evidence. There are four facts agreed upon by the majority of scholars who have written on these subjects. Any adequate alternative explanation must account for:

- i. Jesus' entombment by Joseph of Arimathea
- ii. The discovery of his empty tomb
- iii. His post-mortem appearances
- iv. The origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection.

B. If you refuse to trust in Christ, then you have to decide what you are going to do about your eternity. The fact is that, just like Jesus, all of us are going to die. What happens next? Jesus said:

**John 3:16-18 NKJV** <sup>16</sup>*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.*

<sup>18</sup>*He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*

**John 5:24-25 NKJV** <sup>24</sup>*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. <sup>25</sup>Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.*

**John 6:47 NKJV** *Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.*

**John 11:25-26 NKJV** <sup>25</sup>... *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. <sup>26</sup>And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"*

Believing in Jesus has more to it than simply believing the facts. The idea is that we need to trust Him completely. We rely utterly upon Him to take care of our eternity and submit ourselves to His authority, acknowledging Him as Lord. We put all our eggs in one "Easter" basket without any holding back, without hedging our bets that there might be another way out.

*The ... consequences of the resurrection are incomparable. It is the concrete, factual, empirical proof that: life has hope and meaning; "love is stronger than death"; goodness and power are ultimately allies, not enemies; life wins in the end; God has touched us right here where we are and has defeated our last enemy; we are not cosmic orphans, as our modern secular worldview would make us. And these ... consequences of the resurrection can be seen by comparing the disciples before and after. Before, they ran away, denied their Master and huddled behind locked doors in fear and confusion. After, they were transformed from scared rabbits into confident saints, world-changing missionaries, courageous martyrs and joy-filled touring ambassadors for Christ. (Kreeft & Tacelli, Handbook of Christian Apologetics, p.177)*