

Why Christianity Has a Resurrection

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West Side Church of Christ
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Scripture Reading

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (1 Cor 15:12-19 NIV)

INTRODUCTION

When Paul begins 1 Corinthians 15, he says “I delivered to you matters of first importance.” The gospel. The primary stuff that every Christian knows and needs to know. The first thing of first importance is that Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures. We talked about that last week. Why Christianity has a cross.

Tonight, we turn our attention to the next series of phrases: He was buried, he was raised from the dead, according to the scriptures; and the risen body of Christ was seen, witnessed, and experienced by others.

WHY BURIAL MATTERS

Burial is important. You can't have resurrection without burial. When I was living in England, I once attended a debate between a NT scholar saying the tomb probably wasn't empty, and a philosopher saying it probably was! You see, to save Christianity from embarrassment, some scholars have suggested that Jesus is a great moral figure; but dead people stay dead. So when we talk about Jesus “rising” we mean the spirit of Jesus—the things he stood for—arises in our hearts. Much like JFK or MLK are still with us in that sense, Jesus lives on. But his body is right where they left it. No good, says Paul. You see, “buried” is part of the “first importance” language. And when

resurrection is listed right after “buried,” it raises the likelihood to a fever pitch that Paul meant what went into that tomb came out.

You see the word “resurrection” in the New Testament means “resurrection of the body.” When Jesus suggested raising Lazarus, someone objected, “but he’s been dead for 4 days.” And then my favorite King James word appears: “he stinketh.” Ideas and Souls don’t stink. Bodies do. If they wanted to say it would be a vision, an apparition, a spirit of some kind, they had language for that. In Acts 12, Peter is in prison, and the church gathers to pray for him. James had already been beheaded; Peter was next in line. But that night, God had other plans. God shows up, the gates swing open; Peter leaves the prison and shows up at the door where the church was gathered. The young girl who answers the door runs inside and says, “Peter’s at the door!” but the church says, “leave us alone, we are praying for Peter!” “No,” says the girl, “Peter’s at the door.” Assuming Peter had been beheaded, and she is seeing a vision, an apparition, they say, “it must be his angel.” That’s the way you talk about visions, spirits, and so forth. But that’s not what resurrection means.

When Jesus raises the widow’s son from Nain, the body that was in the coffin gets out of the coffin and goes home. When Jesus rises from the dead himself, Thomas is skeptical. So, Jesus says, “look at my hands, stick your fingers in the hole in my side. Be not faithless but believing.” Resurrection means resurrection of the body. The tomb was full. Then the tomb was empty. He was buried, says Paul. And then, he was raised.

WHAT RESURRECTION IS

Resurrection is not just some great miracle. Its far more than the big “wow”, like the big finale of a firework show. It is a stunning declaration. Paul begins the book of Romans by speaking of Jesus Christ as “descended from David according to the flesh and declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:3-4). Consider how Jesus makes a 2-part argument for his Divinity as the Son of God. Part 1 is his working of miracles, his self-descriptions, his perfect life, and his compelling teaching. But others have worked miracles and offered great teaching. Others have claimed to be the Messiah. So, Jesus offers argument 2: If I am lying, all God has to do is leave me in the grave. But if I rise from the dead, it is God’s confirmation that I am who I said I am. Others have risen from the dead (Lazarus, the widows son, and others). But put them together—(1) I claim to be the Son of God, and (2) God raises me from the dead—that is confirmation of who I truly am.

This is why C. S. Lewis said Jesus’s claims make him either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. The Resurrection settles the debate. As Paul says in Romans 1, he is “Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 1:4).

So, the resurrection is a declaration and it is confirmation. But it’s even more than that. Something *happened* when Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus descended into the depths of death and defeated the powers of darkness. The book of Revelation offers a chilling and powerful portrayal of this fact in chapter 12. First, he sets the scene. Satan grabs a third of the stars of heaven and prepares to fight God’s plan and his people. He sees the woman with child and plans to make war on her and her offspring. Its strong language, but I can’t help but see the Christmas story and the incarnation in view. Satan has all the major roads covered, with the Romans in his pocket, the Herods hand-picked, a disciple greedy for money, and a Messiah who doesn’t resist arrest or crucifixion.

Years ago, I heard the story of a painting in the Louvre in France. Whether it’s a real story I don’t know. But according to the way it was told to me, the tour guide brought a group in front of the painting—one of Mephistopheles playing chess with God. The guide explained the group this was painted during the rise of humanism, where we came to realize we don’t need God to explain things anymore. To illustrate the spirit of humanism, Mephistopheles has a smile on his face, while God looks worried. And the title of the portrait is “Checkmate.” As the tour group made their way to the next painting, one man stayed behind, staring intently at the board. Then suddenly, with eyes as big as saucers, he sees it—and yells out, “It’s a lie! God still has a move!”

Indeed. God still had a move. Satan knew that, too. They double the guard at the tomb. Because if Jesus raises from the dead, then the ultimate punishment—the separation between God and his creatures, is forever broken. The weight of sin is death; but if death be destroyed, then for Satan, the jig is up.

Revelation tells it this way. A war broke out in heaven. Michael the archangel fights against the dragon. The dragon—Satan—is thrown down, and the angels sing “now, salvation has come. For the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before the throne day and night has been cast out.” After this, never again is Satan called “the accuser of the brethren.” If God be for us, who can be against us.

REASONS CHRISTIANS BELIEVE IN RESURRECTION

Christians believe in resurrection. The cross is certainly part of the great news from heaven to all of creation; but what makes it *good* news is that death is not the end of the story. The resurrection forms the center of the gospel of God. Christ came that we

might have life, because he himself *is* the resurrection and the life. Christians proclaim that the Spirit is the giver of Life. And nothing declares that God is Father Almighty quite like saying that God raises the dead—first Jesus, then we ourselves—that death may be swallowed up in victory.

Christians affirm that resurrection hope is real. From the beginning, says NT Wright, Christians have claimed that “something” happened—something real, tangible, and historical—on Easter Sunday. After all,

This “something” left, not just an empty tomb, but a broken loaf at Emmaus and footprints in the sand by the lake among its physical mementoes. It also left his followers with a lot of explaining to do, but with a transformed worldview which is only explicable on the assumption that something really did happen, even though it stretched their existing worldviews to breaking point.¹

He wrote a large book on the Resurrection. In painstaking detail, Wright spends 700 pages² combing through the ancient evidence only to arrive at this remarkable conclusion: “[L]et me underscore,” avers Wright, that it is “impossible...to account for the early Christian belief in Jesus as Messiah without the resurrection.” In his doctoral dissertation William Lane Craig adds more fuel to the fire: the best historical case to be made is that a certain execution, a reliable burial tradition, and an empty tomb demand an explanation; that God raised Jesus from the dead fits the historical data better than any alternative answer proposed.³

The resurrection of Christ confirms our hope in a future reality that awaits us—the end of sorrow and shame, and the hope of glory. Our bodies may lie in the dust—sown in weakness; but they shall be raised in power by the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead...and now lives within us. We now “have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us;” for “we have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf” (Hebrews 6:18-20).

Christians affirm that resurrection hope is relevant. Hope for the future means the past and present is both accountable and redeemable; without future hope, justice and peace are words without meaning. But in the resurrection of Christ, God announced

¹ N. T. Wright, “Only Love Believes: The Resurrection of Jesus and the Constraints of History.” ABC Religion & Ethics. April 17, 2014. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/only-love-believes-the-resurrection-of-jesus-and-the-constraints/10099298>

² N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress Press, 2003). <https://www.amazon.com/Resurrection-Christian-Origins-Question-Vol/dp/0800626796>

³ William Lane Craig, *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus During the Deist Controversy*. Texts and Studies in Religion, Vol 23 (Edwin Mellen Press, 1985). <https://www.amazon.com/Historical-Argument-Resurrection-Controversy-Religion/dp/0889468117>

vindication, exaltation, and salvation are in the offering. There is a future for the people of God, which means there is meaning and purpose in the present! According to Richard Hays,

The early Christians were not just saying that Jesus’s death and resurrection offered forgiveness of sins and the prospect that our individual souls could go to heaven when we die. They were saying that God was remaking the world, unseating the violent powers that have ruled over us, and undoing the power of death. Jeremy Begbie puts it like this: “The Gospel ... tells of a seismic disturbance affecting every atom of creation. The world is and will be a different place because of what has happened in Jesus.”⁴

Belief in future resurrection (on the basis of Christ’s completed resurrection) is ethical as well as political: it is a clarion call for every and all to set right what is wrong, to bind up the wounds and reconcile the separated. Our work for truth, beauty, goodness, and justice in the present matters because of the real and relevant future that awaits the people of God.

CONCLUSION

Isn’t that good news? Faith is necessary for Christian doctrine; love is essential for Christian practice. But hope—genuine hope in the reality to which all doctrine points and all practice imitates—is why we chose the Christian way in the first place...and why we hold to our faith and practice our love in the long wait between the times. The story is not over yet. The new day will dawn, in which the mere echoes of goodness, beauty, and truth which we have witnessed this side of His coming will give way to the fullness for which our hearts are longing. In his sermon entitled “The Weight of Glory,” C. S. Lewis, hinted at the power of this hopeful vision:

“The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”⁵

But that far off country is nearer to us now than when we first believed. In the raising of Christ, God announced the beginning of His return. The wait will soon be over.

⁴ Richard B. Hays, “This is the Day the Lord has made: Living the resurrection in a time of violence and despair.” ABC Religion & Ethics. April 3, 2021. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/richard-hays-easter-living-the-resurrection/13288882>

⁵ C. S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory. <https://verber.com/weight-of-glory/>

Let Sarah Coakley offer a final word, not only for this post, but for this entire series as well:

So here is the great truth at the heart of Christian faith – resurrection. Stake your life on it, struggle with it, and everything will change. Die, turn, see ... and then live in this mystical body, which is the blessed company of all faithful people who...start you on this great adventure of the Christian life of redemption, joy and fulfilment, and which will hold you in all your frailty and glory, unto your life's end. For Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.⁶

⁶ Sarah Coakley, Easter Day Homily, Salisbury Cathedral, March 31, 2013. <https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/easter-day-homily-salisbury-cathedral-2013/>