

## The Resurrection is the Lynchpin of Christianity

### Upsetting the Equilibrium

If you attended a funeral on Friday afternoon, and by Sunday afternoon one of your fellow funeral attendees called you up and shouted, “I saw him! I saw him! I was at the store, and he was walking around, alive! I’m serious!” how would you respond? I can guarantee none of you would believe it. Maybe it was a Doppelgänger who looked like him, maybe the view was blocked, maybe your friend just had a quick flashback to a past memory. That’s exactly what you would say – in a gentle way of course, since the grief is still so profound – but the chances you would take this phone call seriously are zero. That is what makes the Easter resurrection accounts in the Bible so problematic. Christianity claims a dead man came back to life, and that, well ... just doesn’t happen, except on creepy horror movies. You don’t need to have a forensic pathology degree from UM or watch CSI shows to know dead corpses stay in the ground. So why do you believe Easter as much as you do?

### Analyzing the Discrepancy

It’s a misnomer that skepticism about a bodily resurrection is due to a modern, scientific outlook in our post-Enlightenment world; it was the dominant view in the first-century Greek world. Ancient Greek philosophy and religion tended to value the soul over the body. That led to common approaches on how to view death: a person’s spiritual life may improve, or after death only the soul may be taken across the River Styx. The issue was not necessarily some sort of life after death; the issue that was so offensive was a *bodily* resurrection. Ancient Greek people had no notion at all of such a physical resurrection. The Greek dramatist Aeschylus said, “When the dust has drained the blood of a man, once he is slain, there is no resurrection.”<sup>1</sup> The New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, wrote in his book on Jesus’ resurrection, “Christianity was born into a world where its central claim was known to be false. ... Everybody knew dead people didn’t and couldn’t come back to bodily life.”<sup>2</sup> It just doesn’t happen; it’s that simple. So when the apostle Paul enters the university city of Athens, the foremost intellectuals of the day, the Areopagus, sneer at him when he talks about the resurrection; then when he comes to the next city of Corinth, this denial of a bodily resurrection keeps floating around in this congregation. Ancient Greek culture sounds a lot like modern American culture.

Since it seems so logical that dead people simply don’t rise from the dead, let’s see where this takes us. If there is no such thing as a resurrection from the dead, then Jesus of course hasn’t been raised. Then Paul’s passionate preaching about Easter is useless, and so is the Corinthians’ faith. Then Paul and the rest of the apostles really are false witnesses who are making up claims in contradiction to God. Then you are placing your faith in a dead man, who shows just as much power as the guy who’s dying on the cross next to him. Then you are still in your sins, since if Jesus cannot deal with the consequences of sin, death, then he can’t really deal with sin either. Then all those Christians who have already died, all those family members we know and all

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<sup>1</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 647–48. Quoted in Gregory Lockwood, *1 Corinthians, Concordia Commentary*, 560.

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 35, 316. Quoted in Ciampa & Rosner, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 754.

those dear friends in this congregation whom we've lost, are on their way to eternal death. In short, *if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

If death is the end and, to put it bluntly, when we die, we die just like any other animal in our world, then I should quit my job. You should stop coming here and go home right now. We should all stop calling ourselves Christians. There would be no reason to baptize children today or light that paschal candle to show that in baptism God connects us to Jesus' death and resurrection. I should stop doing funerals. I should stop lying. I should be prosecuted for being a con-man. I should descend into pessimism for wasting all my time and effort believing in this fairy tale called Easter.

### **Disclosing the Clue to Resolution**

So it's much better to deny the resurrection in our modern skeptical age, right? Let's see where this goes ... If there is no resurrection, then Jesus has not been raised and you could save some time and effort in abandoning religion. But when you die, everything else you've worked for simply goes away, and your existence ceases. You die, and, to put it bluntly, your body decays, along with all your hopes and dreams you've worked so hard for. Then if this world is all there is, I should descend into pessimism that all my time and effort will be wasted when this world ultimately ceases to exist.

Now how do you know that the resurrection is impossible? Did someone come back from the dead and say, "This is it! Nothing more to expect!" No. You can't ever know that for sure either. You are banking your future on something you don't know. Denying the resurrection is based on an unprovable belief that death is simply the end. No experiment can either prove or disprove what happens after death. So does this skepticism that feels it's more educated than the claims of the Easter accounts get us any further? Ironically, it ends up in the same place! Denying Easter doesn't solve the problem of what death actually is any better! We're stuck. No human being is ever in any sort of position to be able to say what happens after death. So whom can we actually believe? We need someone else who can speak with credibility from experience, someone who actually has faced death himself and lived to see the end of it!

### **Experiencing the Gospel**

Deep down, none of us want to live in a world as if this life is all there is and human beings have as much meaning and purpose as animals, trees, and flowers that beautify our world for a passing moment and then die. With a decisive "but," Paul reserves his line of thought and gives you a foundation you can build your life on. *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.* If there is no resurrection, then our lives would be filled with pessimism; if there is a resurrection of the dead, then that changes everything. If Jesus actually did rise from the dead, then he proves himself to be not just a man, but the Son of God who is the author and controller of life. Then behind our preaching stands the very power that raised Jesus from the dead. Then your faith is founded on history. Then we can testify to coworkers and classmates about something sure and certain in an age of skepticism and doubt. Then your faith means everything. Then your sins are erased, your guilt before God gone, and your condemnation in hell exchanged with eternal life. Then all our loved ones who have passed away in Christ are not lost, but they are simply sleeping until the day Jesus wakes them up. Then Christians have the most hope and confidence of anyone in the world.

Jesus is the one who actually faced death and lived to see the end of it! He is the one you can believe when he tells you what death is all about! Gone are all the hypotheticals, because of

the evidence Paul put forth earlier in this chapter: he is an eyewitness of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, along with the rest of the frightened apostles, who saw Jesus announce peace to them on Easter evening, and skeptical Thomas, who touched Jesus with his hand and put his finger in his wounds. Even today we value eyewitness testimony, so we can't blindly dismiss what the apostles have to say.

### **Anticipating the Consequences**

This section from 1 Corinthians 15 strikes so close to home, because these people in the first century are so similar to us. If Paul and the rest of the apostles were just making all this up, why would they invent a religion where the central event – Easter – is an event that is already disbelieved by all other dominant philosophical and religious systems known across the Roman Empire? Why would the disciples want to admit that they were hiding behind closed doors and didn't want to believe what happened earlier that day, even those Jesus told them multiple times he was going to rise? Why would the apostle Paul have given up a successful life as a respected Pharisee to be marginalized, persecuted, beaten, and finally martyred? Why would the first eyewitnesses be women, whose testimony in the first century would not have been accepted in a Roman court of law? You would never make up a story quite like this one.

Easter turns a seemingly impossible claim into the core of Christianity. It exalts women to be the first witnesses of this world-changing event. It transforms terrified, skeptical disciples hiding behind closed doors into bold witnesses who gave their lives for this message. Just like the resurrection changed their lives, it can change your life too. It's a gift that keeps on giving. Now you have peace, because you know that all the doubt about how your life will end is gone. Now you have peace, because you know that when Jesus rose from the dead, you sin died. Now you have peace, because you know that your standing before God does not depend on what you do for God, but on what God did for you when Jesus lived a perfect life for you, died on the cross for you, and rose from the dead for you. Without the resurrection, everything falls down; with the resurrection everything stands firm, because the resurrection is the lynchpin of Christianity. Amen.