

CHAPTER 6: THE RESURRECTION: HISTORICALLY PROBABLE, RELIGIOUSLY INSIGNIFICANT

“Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them . . . told this to the apostles; but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”
(Luke 24:10–11)

This will no doubt be considered a strange combination. Nevertheless, I regard it as historically probable that something happened on that first Easter, something not too unlike the Biblical resurrection accounts. And I also maintain that what happened is not of any theological significance. In this chapter we will examine the case for each of these positions and then briefly suggest some consequences.

I: Historical Probability

Assume for the moment that we are careful, impartial historians, used to dealing only in probabilities. Let us examine the evidence and see what conclusions we can draw.¹

We should first of all look at the New Testament to see what the Gospels say happened on Easter. Being attentive to detail, as behooves careful historians, we notice that the testimony is confusing and even inconsistent: the post-resurrection Jesus appears and vanishes like a spirit (Luke 24:31, 36–7; John 20:26), yet he can eat solid food (Luke 24:43); he can be touched (Matthew 28:9), and he cannot be touched (John 20:17); it was indeed Jesus, but they do not recognize him at first (Luke 24:15f; John 20:14, 21:4). But we also take note that the Biblical accounts are in total agreement in making the same extraordinary claim: Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified, dead and buried, was alive!

¹A more detailed assessment of current scholarly argument about the resurrection may be found in Appendix B.

This is the testimony. What can we conclude from this? Can we say because of the apparent inconsistencies that this testimony is false? No, for as careful historians we would expect an event like a resurrection to cause confusion. We know that disagreement about details does not mean that the main message is wrong. Messengers who observed a battle from different vantage points could differ greatly on how the battle was won, and still all be correct in reporting that the country has been saved by a great victory.

Can we then say because of the unanimity of the testimony that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead? No. As careful historians all we can say is that according to the record these early disciples claimed to believe that Jesus was resurrected.

How do we get beyond this to assess whether this belief was true or not? How can we judge the probability of the resurrection itself?

Not every one wishes to think about the historical probability of the resurrection. There are a number of people on both sides of the issue who dismiss this question, usually in one of three different ways: (1) The Biblical literalist cannot consider the question of the resurrection's historical probability, for this would be to admit that the accuracy of the Bible is open to doubt. So the literalist avoids this by saying, "Of *course* it happened!" (2) At the other extreme there are people who argue that they have never seen a resurrection, and that therefore such things do not happen, and are therefore impossible, and so a resurrection couldn't and didn't happen to Jesus. These people can no more consider the possibility of an event different in kind from what they have experienced than Biblical literalists can consider the possibility that the Bible is wrong. So these people avoid this by saying, "Of *course* it didn't happen!"

(3) A more imaginative approach has been taken by some theologians who have suggested that the resurrection was an act of God and therefore not a part of human history, and is therefore not subject to the judgment of historians. But this is not very persuasive. Either the resurrection happened to a human or it did not happen at all. And we know of it only because of the reported observations of the disciples. If these observations were not a part of human history, open to study by historians, then they didn't happen.

Being careful and objective historians we are unable to take any of these ways to avoid the question. But if we can't avoid it, how do we answer it? How can we assess the probability of this reported event of two thousand years ago? The written testimony is hardly objective—it is all by one group of people with a very definite bias. How can we get behind this testimony to the event itself?

We can't, at least not in any direct way. But does this mean we must give up any attempt to assess its historical probability? No. There is some important circumstantial evidence to consider.

It is not at all unusual for historians to have to content themselves with unobjective accounts of an event and to make use of circumstantial evi-

dence to confirm or disprove these accounts. Centuries later this is usually all we have to go by. And it is often quite adequate to allow us to reach very definite conclusions.

This may surprise us, for we are used to the TV courtroom dramas in which circumstantial evidence is much maligned. But circumstantial evidence can be good, strong evidence. For instance, if Jones the underpaid bank clerk didn't show up for work one Monday and was never heard from again, and a large amount of money was discovered missing in his department, we would all agree that this was a pretty good reason for suspecting Jones of the crime. If we then discovered that he was living high on the hog in Barbados, we would all think this was adequate evidence to consider Jones guilty *unless* he could offer an alternative plausible explanation of these circumstances. If he didn't just come into an inheritance or win the state lottery, we could justifiably conclude that Jones has embezzled, just from circumstantial evidence. No one actually saw him make off with the money, but we don't need that to prove our case. The evidence of the surrounding circumstances is overwhelming.

Thus, if a certain event or fact under question is the *only* plausible explanation of the known facts, of the surrounding circumstances and events, then we should certainly say that this event or fact is at least probable. Generally, we are not so cautious and would consider it proven.

Before and After

We can now consider the evidence. From Biblical passages which there is no reasonable cause to doubt we can draw this general account of the time in Jerusalem:

The disciples came with Jesus from Galilee for the Passover. Their expectations were undoubtedly high. Had not their teacher astounded all of Galilee with his teaching and healing, and drawn great crowds in the Decapolis, and confounded the scribes and Pharisees with his wisdom and authority? Had he not come through it all unscathed and even victorious? The possibilities in Jerusalem must have seemed limitless. Was it not the Holy City itself, with the one great Temple of God? Perhaps it was even time for God to fulfill some of the ancient prophecies and restore the throne of David. At the very least, Jesus would be received as the great prophet he was. This was the unavoidable feeling of Jesus' disciples. If he did warn them of danger it certainly didn't sink in.

Then there was the entry into Jerusalem. They may have spent the night before in Bethany, just a few miles away. Either there or in Bethphage he borrowed a donkey—one might infer from the Synoptics that this was prearranged, complete with a password—and so began his descent down the Mount of Olives in a way that seemed to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah: "Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you . . . humble and riding on an ass." (Zechariah 9:9)

The accounts agree that it was a joyous and triumphant entry. The disciples, and probably a number of fellow travelers from the crowds coming up for the Passover, shouted hosannas. Crowds can easily get excited for celebrities, and they may have cried out such things as "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed be the son of David!", and they even spread "palms" in the road before him.

The first few days in Jerusalem must have continued to raise their hopes. He "cleansed" the Temple, enforcing the law by chasing out the money-changers and the pigeon-sellers while the temple police just watched, unable or unwilling to stop him. Again he confounded the scribes and Pharisees and he attracted crowds so large and enthusiastic that the authorities, concerned about him, were afraid to lay a hand on him in public. It must have seemed evident to his disciples that Jesus of Nazareth was bound for new heights of recognition and triumph. Who could guess what he might accomplish next?

Then, suddenly, it was over. The inconceivable had happened. His whereabouts made known to the high priest, betrayed by one of his own inner circle, Jesus was arrested away from the crowds. Tried at the high priest's home that very night and before the Sanhedrin the next morning, taken to Pilate, rejected by the crowd and mocked by the Romans, he was sentenced to the debasing death of crucifixion and by sunset he was dead and laid in a tomb.

The reaction of the disciples was what we would expect. They were shocked, demoralized, and uncomprehending. In a strange city, bereft of their charismatic leader, identifiable as rustic Galileans by their accents, afraid of persecution and arrest to the point of denying Jesus, and most of all suffering grief-stricken shock and shattered dreams and hearts, they clung together for awhile helplessly and hopelessly. But soon they began to drift apart. After all, what purpose did they have anymore? Their hopes and expectations for their beloved prophet had been decisively and cruelly brought to an end in a way that had not seemed possible. They were defeated.

There is no reason to doubt the general accuracy of this picture. But there is also no question that just a short time later this same group of people was proclaiming that this Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and had been raised from the dead. And we find them preaching this with enthusiasm, purpose and dedication—and with such conviction that they were willing to risk persecution, imprisonment, and even death in order to make known their message.

Something Happened

Obviously, something happened. Something happened to cause this radical turnabout. There are two possibilities: either the disciples, in their mourning, conspired together to put one over on the world, or else

they really believed that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead.

We have to ask ourselves which of these is more probable, putting aside our preconceptions and keeping in mind what we know of human nature. Can both of these possibilities explain the sudden turnaround of a grief-stricken and demoralized group of people? Can both possibilities explain the enthusiasm and contagious conviction which led to the rapid spread of Christianity? Can both explain the disciples' willingness to suffer and die for the sake of this message?

No. It strains our credibility beyond the breaking point to try to explain all this as the result of an apostolic fabrication. Could you go out and preach with joy? Or risk death for a message if you had any doubts about it? If you had made it up?

In the face of the evidence the impartial historian is bound to conclude that the disciples did indeed sincerely believe that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead.

Obviously, then, we must also conclude that something happened to cause them to believe this. Something happened. This much is certain. The question is, what happened? What was the nature of this event? Was it really a resurrection?

If we are prudent and objective historians we cannot answer this question. Something happened which caused the disciples to believe that Jesus was resurrected. We cannot say precisely what that something was.

There are a couple of more things that we can say about this event with a fair degree of certainty. First, it is very probable that the tomb was indeed empty. Not only do the four Gospels agree on this, and not only do Mark and John point out that this in itself further saddened the disciples, but Matthew goes to the trouble of discrediting a tale started by opponents of the early Christians that the empty tomb was a result of the disciples stealing away Jesus' body while the guards slept. (Matthew 28:11–15) Certainly no opponent of the Church would try to explain the missing body with a tale like this unless they felt they had to admit that the tomb was empty to begin with.

Secondly, there is little doubt that it was Mary Magdalene who discovered that the tomb was empty, either alone or with other women, and that it was she who first reported an experience of the risen Jesus. This same experience was then repeated by others, and before long there was enthusiastic preaching of the risen Christ.

In the role of objective historians we can conclude only that something remarkable happened on the first Easter, something that was capable of being interpreted as the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. We can never know just what his disciples experienced to convince them of this.

Personally—that is, no longer sticking to the role of objective historian—I believe that whatever happened was enough like the triumph of Jesus over death that to call it a resurrection has some legitimacy. And

after all, it doesn't really matter if it was an actual bodily resurrection, because a bodily resurrection has no religious significance.

II: Religious Insignificance

After pointing out the impact of the Easter event, we cannot now say that it was *historically* insignificant. Whatever its precise nature may have been, it provided the impetus for the movement that became the Christian Church. It has historical importance of the first magnitude. But this event, and its historical probability, do not have *religious* significance.

This statement flies directly in the face of what is probably the only consensus of Christians and non-Christians alike about the Christian faith: that it stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. But this consensus is wrong. We will examine the two areas in which the greatest importance is claimed for the resurrection: (1) the question of our salvation; and (2) the question of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth (which is of course related to the first question).

(1) Soteriological² Insignificance

"If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." So says Paul in I Corinthians 15:14. He repeats this for emphasis just three verses later: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." Paul is saying quite clearly that salvation from sin and death is directly dependent upon the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

This is probably a common belief, but it places more weight on the resurrection than it can logically bear. Even if we were to grant (for the sake of argument only) that God could or would intervene in this way in earthly affairs, God's resurrection of this one person cannot logically support the likelihood of salvation for the rest of us: (A) It cannot prove that God is able to save us from death and grant us eternal life; (B) it cannot guarantee that God is interested in doing this; and (C) it does not even show that God will forgive our sins.

(A) The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth does not even show that God was able to grant eternal life to this one individual, much less to the rest of us. At the most, it shows that God was able to keep one person alive for a short time after physical death. That Jesus went on to *eternal* life is certainly not proven by his few days or weeks of post-death appearances on earth. This can only be accepted on faith. Of course, if we believe that God is creator/maintainer of the universe then we can have faith that God somehow preserves our lives after death. But we ought to be able to have this faith without demanding a proof—for no proof is

²Soteriological means having to do with salvation.

possible—and quite independently of whether or not Jesus was raised from the dead. (If there *were* a connection between eternal life and a bodily resurrection shortly after death, this would be of little solace to the rest of us.)

(B) Even if the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth could show that God could grant eternal life—which it doesn't—it still gives us no indication that God has any intention of granting this to any of the rest of us. After all, none of the rest of us happens to be Jesus Christ. (Again, we could note the apparent dearth of resurrections recently.)

Assuredly, we have faith that God loves us and that therefore God will grant us eternal life if this is possible and is best for us. But again, this is an article of faith. It can neither be proven or disproven by the truth or falsity of the resurrection accounts.

(C) It will be claimed that the resurrection of Jesus is vital to our salvation because the resurrection showed God's acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. This of course ties in with the idea that Jesus died *in order* that God could forgive our sins and so grant us eternal life. This is wrong (see Chapter 14). But even if you believed that since Jesus died on the cross, *now* God can forgive your sins, and you will be saved if you repent and believe—what does the resurrection add to that? If God will forgive you for Jesus' sake, isn't that true whether or not Jesus was raised?

Or to look at it another way: what is there in the resurrection of this one man which implies the forgiveness of anyone? What is there in the Easter event itself that indicates this? Nothing. Only by referring to the preaching of Jesus (and the Church) do we hear about God's forgiveness. We can only accept on faith that God forgives and accepts those who repent and turn. Jesus tells us this before the resurrection and entirely apart from it.

(2) Christological Insignificance

It could be argued that Paul was saying something else. In saying, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain," perhaps Paul meant not that our salvation depends on the resurrection itself, but rather that our salvation depends on Jesus being the Son of God, and this is what depends on the resurrection. After all, Paul says that Jesus was "designated Son of God . . . by his resurrection from the dead". (Romans 1:4) Indeed, do we not depend on the resurrection to show us that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of God? Isn't this what makes him the Messiah?

Certainly the Easter event played an important and probably decisive role in convincing his disciples that Jesus was "he who is to come", the promised one, the Messiah. We can understand why this was so. They had a common sense that accepted the idea of a God who intervened in human affairs on specific occasions for specific purposes. The resurrec-