

## Believing in the Resurrection

There is no question that the resurrection of Jesus is the essential foundation of the Christian faith. Without it, the edifice of the Church's faith would simply collapse. The Apostle Paul made this point in the first century: "If Christ is not raised, your faith is vain, and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). Thus it is important to know why we believe in the resurrection, what we believe about it, and why belief in it is so critical to Christian faith.

Why do we believe in the resurrection? Why should we be convinced that it is true? After all, as we shall see, if a man was verifiably dead, and then after a three day period was demonstrably seen alive, this is the singularly most significant event in history. It is therefore incumbent upon us to determine, to the best of our ability, whether or not the claim of the resurrection is in fact true. Let us look to the historical issues that surround the resurrection.

In seeking to know the truth of the resurrection of Jesus, the first element to contend with is the fact of the empty tomb. I deliberately use the word "fact," because if the body of the dead Jesus could have been produced, that would have been the end of any talk of his resurrection. Certainly his enemies, those who saw to his execution, had the motivation to find his body and thus refute the claim that he rose from the dead (see Matthew 27:63-64). But the tomb was empty. No one could produce the body of Jesus, and thus stop the apostles from boldly proclaiming that he was risen.

The fact of the empty tomb also refutes the claim that the resurrection of Jesus was a purely "spiritual" event – that Jesus was raised "spiritually" and not bodily, as some sects teach. Such a "resurrection" would have made no sense to the Jews of the first century. "Resurrection" meant bodily resurrection to them. The resurrection is a claim that his body came back to life, not that his spirit lived on. The idea that Jesus rose "in spirit" does not answer the question of the empty tomb or satisfy the Jewish understanding of resurrection. The same is true of other similar versions: that the resurrection is the disciples' experience of the "ongoing significance of Jesus" or other such things. The apostles clearly proclaimed his bodily resurrection, and their opponents could not produce his body to disprove their claim.

There have been those, from the first century onward, who have argued that the resurrection was a plot organized by the disciples to keep the message of Jesus alive. According to the various versions of this story, after Jesus' death, the disciples got together and decided to invent the story of his resurrection to convince people to accept his teachings, even though his mission ended in failure. According to this view, the disciples were all liars and the resurrection the lie of all lies.

There are two fallacies in this misguided notion. First, in this case, the disciples would have had to violate their own teachings about Jesus in order to promote his teaching. For the apostles presented Jesus as "the Truth," and called Satan "the father of lies" (John 14:6, 8:44). Again and again in the New Testament we find them advocating truth and attacking all lies. Were these men who gave their lives to proclaim truth actually liars all along? This makes no sense.

Second, with the exception of the Apostle John, all the apostles were martyred for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is certainly true that men will give their lives for all kinds of causes, as long as they believe in them. They may indeed be mistaken or misguided, but there is no question that they themselves believe in the cause they choose to die for. But who is ready and willing to die – joyfully, as did the apostles – for what they know to be false? It is not likely that the apostles would have willingly died to promote a message that they knew to be false and a contradiction.

Finally, we must consider the appearances of the risen Jesus. The New Testament includes accounts of his appearances to his women disciples, the apostles themselves, and many others. Although the accounts differ somewhat from one another, the Apostle Paul offers this summary: "And that (after his death) he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures; and that he was seen of Cephas (Peter), then of the twelve; after that, he was seen at once by more than five hundred brethren, of whom the greater number are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. After that, he was seen by James, then by all the apostles. And last of all, he was seen by me also" (1 Corinthians 15:4-8).

The Apostle Paul could cite without fear of contradiction that there were many alive that had seen the resurrected Jesus. Given that they were not all liars, is it possible that they were all deluded? Were the appearances of Jesus simply religious "visions" such as happen to many people? We are back again to the question of the empty tomb. If the apostles and the other witnesses were simply spiritual "visionaries," then it would have easily been possible to discount their claims about the resurrection by producing his body. But such was never done.

We thus have the historical case for the resurrection of Jesus. His tomb was found empty. His followers saw him after he was alive. They willingly gave up their lives to proclaim the message of his resurrection. Neither the claim that they were liars or deluded stands up to the evidence. The honest conclusion is that they indeed were witnesses to his resurrection.

This is the historical side of why we believe in the resurrection. This is why we are convinced it is true. We trust the witness of the disciples. We believe they were truthful witnesses of what they saw. "Christ is risen! Indeed he is risen!"

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## **What is expected of us?**

So what is expected of us now that Lent has passed, and Pascha is here? The answer is to keep Lent and Pascha all throughout the year. What I mean by this is that its possible to practice the repentance, prayerfulness, and fasting of Lent, as well as the joy of the Resurrection of Christ every week! Try and make your Wednesdays and Fridays (the two days of the week designated as fasting days unless it is a fast-free week) as two 'mini-lents' Continue for those two days of the week in your fast. Continue in your prayer. Continue in your Scripture reading. Continue in your works of charity for the poor and needy. And then when each Sunday comes, treat it as a 'mini-Pascha.' Every Sunday the Church provides us with hymns and prayers on the theme of the Resurrection of Christ to put us in a joyous mood for the Sabbath. You can celebrate the Risen Christ every Sunday of the year. Get together with family, friends, acquaintances, strangers, anyone, and rejoice in the risen Christ. Share a meal together. Make Sunday a special day. Why relegate festive joy in Christ's Resurrection to only one day of the year? To all I wish a blessed paschal season, and through the saving grace of the risen Christ may we all proceed closer to our goal: to abide eternally with the author of life. Amen.

