

Deeper into the Resurrection

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Jesus's resurrection is commonly accepted as the central tenet of Christian faith. It has and continues to be much debated. Christian apologists believe they can make a case for a literal, bodily resurrection on the basis of historical "facts." Skeptics dispute this. I'm not sure how helpful any of that discussion really is.

Resurrection is the Christian response to the greatest ambiguity of life: does our suffering have any meaning; is there any redemption, or are we doomed to a life of pain in a cruel world before death finally makes an end of it all? This question concerns all of us, and can be a driver of tremendous anxiety.

The popular understanding seems to be that we know what resurrection is. But do we? We think of resurrection as Jesus physically rising up and walking out of the tomb. But it is not that simple.

We have four Gospel accounts of what happened after the resurrection, and they all contradict each other. The contradictions are well known and I won't recount them here. It is easy to demonstrate, however, that they cannot be reconciled. So did one get it right and the other three get it wrong? That seems hardly likely.

Paul also tells us of his experience with the resurrected Christ, and it doesn't match any of the Gospels. Here is what he says:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me....

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8,20)

We may note at least a couple of remarkable things here. The word “appeared” is *ophthi*, literally “was seen.” Neither here nor in Acts do we have any indication of Paul interacting with a physically risen Christ. In fact, Paul himself seems unsure of whether his experience had any physical aspect at all: “whether in the body or out of the body I do not know” (2 Corinthians 12:3). And yet the language Paul uses here equates his experience with the resurrection appearances to the disciples: for Paul, all these experiences were of the same kind, and not necessarily physical.

The other thing to note is Paul’s calling Jesus’s being raised from the dead “the first fruits of those who have died.” The phrase may sound mysterious to us, but made sense in Paul’s theological framework.

It is important to note this, to understand how the concept has changed over time. Paul was working within the context of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology. As we know from 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15, he expected the end of history to arrive within his lifetime. At that time there would be a general resurrection of the dead to face the final judgment. Jesus’s resurrection, as the “first fruits” of this general resurrection, was just the first of more to come soon. Therefore resurrection itself is not proof of divinity; it was something about to happen to everyone. It was only later that the church’s understanding of it changed.

When the end did not arrive as expected, the Christian community had to adjust. We see traces of this already in the Gospels, as the expectation of the end time becomes more obscure as one progresses through each Gospel in order. People gradually stopped thinking of a general resurrection and came to see the resurrection of Christ as a unique event in history, that only he could accomplish because he was God. But this is not how the resurrection was originally understood.

Nevertheless, this now-considered unique event in history was combined with a statement by Paul, made in a completely different context, to become a basic article of the Christian faith:

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

Paul saw Christ as the agent accompanying us through the final judgment, and that if we accept his leadership we will pass through to the kingdom.

But later Christianity saw accepting Jesus's resurrection as proof of his divinity constituting the way to salvation and a passport out of hell.

I could never really make sense of this. I could not – still cannot – fathom how the emergence of the body of a Godlike figure from a tomb – possible only because he was God – can possibly benefit anyone else. As God, Jesus could do anything, and the unique event of his resurrection – no longer seen as simply the first event in a sequence, but pertaining to Jesus alone and proving his divinity – was a great accomplishment for him, but has seemingly little to do with me, since I do not share that divinity.

Is it possible to understand the resurrection in a way that affects all of us, and not only Jesus as having made a superhuman accomplishment?

I believe the best argument in favor of the resurrection is the fact that Jesus's followers did not end up demoralized, but continued the movement even after his brutal death. The Romans designed crucifixion not only to execute undesirables as painfully as possible, but to terrorize the population and frighten anyone out of even thinking of behaving like the crucified victims. They left the body to rot on the cross for days, to be attacked by wild dogs and predatory birds. After nature ran its course, what remained of the crucified unfortunate would be thrown into a common grave. This was by far the usual practice.

Was an exception made in Jesus's case, allowing him a decent burial? The Romans may have made rare exceptions, but almost certainly not in the case of someone condemned for insurrection, as Jesus was. Recall the inscription over his cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The Roman government would especially have wished to make an example of any political rebel or rival ruler challenging the authority of the emperor. Surrendering the body of such an agitator to the very people he was going to lead in defiance of Roman authority would have defeated an important purpose of crucifying him in the first place: using terror to immobilize them and to ensure that none of them would even think of resisting Rome in the future.

For these reasons many scholars and historians consider Joseph of Arimathea's burying Jesus in a separate tomb highly unlikely, as well as the Gospels' sympathetic treatment of Pilate, who we know from other sources was exceedingly brutal and not at all inclined to accommodate Jewish

desires. In any case, the Joseph of Arimathea account is contradicted by Acts 13:29 (which may be just as historically unlikely). We cannot know for certain exactly what happened to Jesus's body. But we can be fairly certain that whatever the Romans did to it was intended to crush his movement once and for all.

And yet it didn't. That is hard to explain. And yet it does not necessarily imply the physical emergence of a body from an empty tomb. The four Gospel accounts of the resurrection are hopelessly contradictory, with Luke's version in Acts only adding to the confusion. It is highly unlikely that one account (which one?) happened to get it right and all the others got it wrong. Rather, one cannot understand these accounts literally, nor were they probably intended to be so understood. This is how I put it in my study on the resurrection:

Paul had a profound religious experience and used resurrection language to describe it, since that language best expressed his beliefs and best enabled him to grasp what had happened to him. And so it also is with the Gospels. Each Gospel in its own unique way uses resurrection language to represent an experience that otherwise would have been impossible to verbalize. The language is common but the experiences of each community are unique, and so the Gospel accounts differ dramatically, each one expressing the needs and experiences of its own community. Because they are incompatible when only the plain meanings of their words are considered, *the Gospel accounts of the resurrection were not intended to be, nor should they be, taken literally*. They are written in a first-century Jewish idiom that we may call *midrash*, which may be defined as *the use of legend to reveal spiritual truth...*¹

It seems far more than likely that what we have before us in these widely varying accounts of the resurrection is, as in the case of Paul, the use of resurrection language to represent an experience that could not have been adequately described any other way.²

So if we don't have a literal body walking out of a tomb, what exactly do we have? Some scholars have suggested that Peter experienced a hallucination: some kind of a vision of the deceased Jesus, much as many people have visions of their loved ones who have died, not at all uncommon. Then Peter told the other disciples, who became convinced Jesus was still alive and so continued the movement he founded. Supposedly Paul himself was influenced by these reports, which stimulated

¹ Charles S. Gourgey, *The Meaning of the Resurrection* (Kindle Direct Publishing, 2020), 65.

² *Ibid.*, 66.

a similar experience of his own. Paul's mission to the Gentiles led to the fledgling faith eventually taking on global significance.

I do not find this explanation convincing. I don't think one person's private hallucinatory experience, even if told to others who would have wanted to believe, would have sparked a movement of such dynamism that it radically changed the world. As noted, many people have visions of recently passed loved ones, and their influence generally does not go beyond the one who had it. Others might be interested, but the experience was not theirs. The natural response to Peter, if he had just had a hallucination about Jesus that no one else shared, would have been "Peter, how wonderful that sounds, but you must be seeing things." Of course one can neither disprove nor prove this speculation about Peter's unique private vision changing the world. I just find it completely implausible.

So what might actually have happened? I think something must have, or the disciples would not have recovered from the trauma and the horror of what they witnessed. But if a physical, bodily emergence from the tomb is unlikely, what then?

We are now encountering the greatest unknown in the Gospel story. Nobody has a definitive answer to this question. The answer scripture gives is couched in symbols, more understandable to first-century Jews than they are to us, and we don't know how to translate those symbols. But I think the following explanation does make sense.

There is an unseen dimension to reality that we call eternal. We all experience it in different ways. In his *Systematic Theology* Paul Tillich calls it "spiritual presence." It is an intimation of a reconciling presence beyond the sufferings of this world, which we may feel only in rare moments, but that can have transformative power. Here is something that happened to me:³

Before I retired I worked in hospice, bringing music to people who were dying. I made a connection with one woman, Fern, who really liked the music I played for her on my recorder (a kind of wooden flute). She asked me to come see her again. A week later I did, and found her in her final

³ The following story is narrated in more detail in chapter 20 of my book *Judeochristianity: The Meaning and Discovery of Faith* (Cleveland, TN: Parson's Porch Books, 2011).

stages, no longer able to respond verbally. She was very agitated and restless, seemingly unable to find peace. I played for her the most soothing music I could think of, just sitting by her bedside and waiting. Her body relaxed, and before long she let go entirely and slipped away from this world.

I didn't think much of it at first, but shortly after I left the hospice I was struck by a sudden feeling of peace that immobilized me. I felt almost as if I had been taken out of this world. It was a deep, healing peacefulness, such as I had never experienced before and never experienced after. It lasted three whole days, and during those three days I felt held by something greater than me and greater than this world, replacing any preoccupations I had with my daily troubles and struggles. I greatly missed it when those three days came to an end.

I have no naturalistic way of explaining what happened. It was not a hallucination. I did not see, feel, or hear anything. It felt like an experience of a better world. It was not a sensory experience, but it was a spiritual one.

I believe that for me, for that brief time, the usual separation between this world and the eternal was broken. I don't know how it happened. I wondered whether somehow Fern, who wanted to thank me for my presence with her, was able to help me for a brief period of time. This I do not know, but am open to that possibility. In any case, just for those three days, that peacefulness felt more real than any sensory experience. I only wish I could recapture it.

This gives me a clue as to what might have happened on that first Easter. It could be that somehow Jesus, because he lived a life so transparent to God, was able to make his presence felt to his disciples soon after he died. Or possibly that somehow the spiritual presence broke through that moment and reached those who were closest to him. And this could well have affected several of the survivors. There is no way to describe this directly, so the Gospel writers transmitted a set of symbols meant to capture the experience and convey its essence to their readers. The best language they had – the only language they had – for doing this was one already current in the theology of the time: the language of resurrection. So that is the language they used.

If this is indeed anything like what happened, it would be similar to the experience I described but of a much greater magnitude, affecting a much wider radius. Its effects would reverberate through time. I often wondered where the greatest spiritual works come from, such as Bach's cantatas or Handel's *Messiah*, works that seem to transcend their creators. Experiencing them gives me a sense of the eternal, similar to my hospice experience. I think they may well have been inspired by the spiritual presence that visited the disciples that first Easter morning. And perhaps even now those who feel something of the eternal when they experience these works also find themselves within the radius of the transcendent event that happened on that day.

Of course I cannot prove any of this, but I still find this the most plausible way of understanding the resurrection; in fact, the only way that makes sense to me. Neither the reductionist approach of the skeptics nor the literalist approach of the orthodox convinces me at all; both extremes seem hopelessly lacking. Additionally, understanding the resurrection as spiritual presence rather than as a body walking out of a tomb makes it applicable not just to Jesus but to everyone.

As previously noted, a supernatural feat performed by a Godlike figure is beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. But the eternal spiritual presence is something to which we all belong, and what the resurrection tells us is that this is our reality, that whatever pain and sorrow may befall us in this life, there is something else greater and better underneath it. Jesus somehow enabling this spiritual presence to be felt on earth, both through his ministry and at his death, was the culmination of *Jewish* prophecy. Jesus was the continuation and culmination of a *Jewish* story, but one destined to give hope to everyone ("and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," Genesis 12:3). The great Hebrew prophets constantly reminded the people there is something beyond the material world, something to which we will be called to account, but which also consoles and redeems us. That was their great innovation. *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

So when we read the resurrection accounts in the Gospels we can try to read them as history – a futile undertaking, since we then have to decide which of the contradictory accounts is most "historical" – or as dogma, descriptions of an unnatural occurrence in which we must believe or put our salvation at risk, a destructive conclusion imposed by the church on the

Gospel story. Or we can find another way. We can read these accounts for what they really are, a rich language of symbols meant to convey a reality beyond time and space, to which we belong and to which we will return. This, I believe, is why the “synoptic” Gospels are “synoptic” (parallel with each other) only until we get to the resurrection, after which they go in four separate directions (or even five separate directions, if you include the version in Acts, which contradicts even the one by the same author in Luke). Because at the resurrection we no longer find ourselves in human time. We are in another realm entirely, in which temporospatial events are only suggestions of things inexpressible. The “events” that occur in the appearance stories are not the close of Jesus’s earthly ministry; they are an opening into the eternal mystery. They do not, for they cannot, tell us exactly what that mystery is, but they do give us an awesome feel for it, if we read them the right way, not as events taking place on earth but as entrances into a new reality that, while we cannot understand exactly what it entails, is nevertheless reassuring.

We need not have had any special experiences in order to appreciate this – the purpose of the resurrection symbols is to convey a sense of the eternal to all of us, whatever our past experiences may have been. I find it best not to read them as stories, certainly not as histories, but slowly, contemplatively, lingering over each image, seeing each one as an entrance into a realm we do not usually encounter. The power of these stories is that their scope is universal. They are not the private province of one person, as a hallucination would be, but carry a sense of the spiritual presence accessible to all. The spiritual presence belongs to all of us, or more accurately, is that to which each of us belongs. The Gospel writers were not recording events as a reporter or a biographer might. They were looking for symbols with the ability to carry this presence to the searching world.

Underneath the words of the resurrection stories there is a voice speaking to us, not of doctrine, not of belief, not of historical events and superhuman accomplishments, but of reconciliation and eternal life, to which all have access and in which all may participate. Unfortunately the church, going back to Paul, has made belief in the resurrection a condition of salvation. Once we do that, we can no longer hear the voice, and we risk turning this great redemptive symbol into something tyrannical. The Gospels did not make belief in the resurrection a prerequisite for salvation. Paul unfortunately did, but we forget he was working under a theological

framework unfamiliar to most of us. He expected the end of history and beginning of the messianic age to occur within his lifetime, and saw the resurrected Jesus as our accompanying presence through the final judgment. None of that has happened. Jesus already told us what we need to inherit eternal life: to love God (meaning love and goodness), and our neighbor as ourself.

It is so important to read the Gospels, and especially their presentations of the resurrection, apart from theologies later imposed upon them by the church. God does not make the innocent pay for the sins of the guilty. Jesus did not die an unspeakably horrible death because God could not have forgiven us if he didn't. Such a terrifying God, who created us flawed yet who demands perfection on penalty of either hell for us or crucifixion of an innocent, is not scriptural. Such a God is an impediment against understanding what Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, really had to teach us about eternal life.

If we can set aside what we may have learned about the resurrection, what others may have taught us, and come to these stories fresh, with naïve minds, then we may be able to approach their real significance. And that, indeed, would be to stand upon holy ground.

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