



The Significance of the Resurrection of Jesus

Fred Stainthorpe

Death, resuscitation and resurrection

Mark Twain once remarked that death and taxes were the only certainties in life. We could add suffering to his list. Yet taxes can be evaded or avoided and suffering assuaged. Death however is less manageable. Hamlet once described it “as an undiscovered country from whose bourne no travellers return”. So when the first Christians began to say the opposite, it became essential for all, believers and sceptics, now as then, to ascertain whether the claim “Jesus is alive” was true and what it meant.

To many people, including some Christian believers, the Resurrection just means that “Jesus came back to life”. They liken it to stories of people who have died, say on an operating table, and have been resuscitated and so the Easter account falls into that category. However, the New Testament tells a very different story. It claims that Jesus did not come back from death. He did much more. He went through death and destroyed it.

There are three recorded instances in the Gospels in which Jesus brought dead people back to life. They are the young girl in Mark 5, the widow of Nain’s son in Luke 7 and Lazarus in John 11. These were all remarkable events, but they were not resurrections. They were resuscitations. They undoubtedly amazed the onlookers but nobody claimed that the people concerned had conquered death. They all resumed life where it had abruptly ended, grew old and eventually died again. Their return to life did not found a new religion. It was not seen as good news. It affected only the people concerned. The resurrection of Jesus was of a different order as the word “anastasis”, used to describe it, implies. It was a raising to a new level of life with consequences for the whole world. This is why Christians see it as the fulcrum of history and the lynchpin of their faith.

Jesus’ resurrection explains the rapid expansion of the Christian faith

Others say that the Resurrection has no significance as it never occurred. Jesus’ disciples somehow overcame their feelings of guilt and grief by inventing a story that he had returned to life. It is extremely difficult psychologically to see how this could have happened. Guilt, grief and fear depress people. They do not energise them, uplift them or turn disciples into apostles. The theory also does not account for the remarkable joy which the early Christians experienced and about which they often wrote (“joy unspeakable and full of glory” 1 Peter 1:8) It does not explain, either, the rapid expansion of the Christian faith, the fact that the New Testament records that they very soon began to proclaim that Jesus was alive and that they were so willing to suffer extreme persecution for their beliefs. As someone once remarked “Men (and women, of whom there were many) do not die for a lie”.

The Christian sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist also offer evidence for the “physicality” of the Resurrection. The early church practice of immersing new believers in water for them to re- emerge is difficult to understand apart from the fact that they were testifying to their experience of a sort of death to their old lives and a rebirth based on the fact that Jesus actually did die and was raised. Likewise, it is hard to see how the early Church could have instituted a rite which centred around the crucifixion of Christ, and called it Eucharist or “Thanksgiving”, without their belief that Jesus had transcended death. Had Jesus not been raised and they had held such a ceremony, it would have brought back so many memories of their denial and desertion that they would have said “Never again!”. Something tremendous must have occurred for them to have instituted it and for the Church to have continued it ever since. If it was not the Resurrection, what was it? Evidence based on practice has its own type of authority.

Unconvincing objections

Variations of this attitude are the Muslim claim that Jesus did not really die, being a prophet, and that another was somehow put to death in his place. Yet both Jewish and Roman authors of the 1st century AD however, state unequivocally that Jesus was crucified in the reign of Pontius Pilate. Why should they have invented such stories? They had no motive to do so and some were even opposed to Christianity.

Other variations of these attitudes are that the grieving women went to the wrong tomb or that the disciples stole the body of Jesus. It is difficult to accept that those who saw him buried would have forgotten it so soon or that the disciples had any reason to steal his corpse. How would they have disposed of it? In a warm climate and in a small city like Jerusalem it would soon have become noticeable. Having done this, they would have been even less able or inclined to proclaim that he was alive.

Possibly the most bizarre of these theories states that Jesus did not really die. He “swooned” or was comatose when he was buried. The cold of the tomb revived him and he came out of it. Either he found his followers or they found him. This account raises more problems than it solves. The Roman soldiers who took him down from the cross had seen many dead bodies.

One of them had pierced his side from which flowed water and blood-sign of a ruptured heart. We are asked to explain how in his depleted state he was able to free himself from the heavy winding clothes, move the stone outside the tomb (it was very large), somehow stagger to his friends' house and convince them that he had conquered death. After having nursed him back to health, they would have needed much mental agility to proclaim that he was the prince of life.

The empty tomb presents these theories with further objections. The Jewish authorities had every reason to silence Jesus' Messianic claims. They only had to produce the body and his movement would have come to an abrupt end. They were unable to do so. In addition, there is no record of any veneration of the tomb of Jesus as might have been expected from grieving later followers.

None of these explanations contains enough force to explain the rapid expansion of the Christian faith into the Near Eastern world within decades of the crucifixion or the effect it had on people's lives.

Dr Peter May, a former President of the Christian Medical Fellowship once, in his earlier life, while examining the evidence for the Resurrection, while still unsure of himself, felt constrained to admit that "such a big movement really needs a powerful launching pad". The most sceptical of scholars, must admit that something remarkable must have happened to change, for example, Saul of Tarsus, the fanatical Jewish arch-persecutor of Christianity into its pre-eminent apostle whose preaching and writing activities spread throughout the first century Middle East and whose writings have been so influential in Christian history. Nor can it explain how the other apostles, born and bred as separatist Jews came to preach to Gentiles and began to have fellowship with them on a hitherto unknown scale. If this was not due to the resurrection what equivalent explanation can there be?

Probably the most widespread popular opinion is that "somebody" started a rumour that Jesus was alive and this spread throughout the world. This theory is remarkably lacking in evidence. It cannot explain how or why the first Christians who were Jews took the gospel to Gentiles (us!). For almost five centuries before this, the Jews had followed a way of life strictly separate from other peoples, believing that they were the elect people of God, despising Gentiles and at best tolerating them. Suddenly in the mid-first century we see mixed groups of Jews and Gentiles springing up all over the Mediterranean world, sharing a common faith and learning to love one another. Acts 10 and 11 show us that they did not do this automatically but rather as a result of an inner compulsion, which also bears witness to Luke, the author's, honesty.

In the course of these events they also gave birth to two unique forms of literature in the Gospels and Letters of the New Testament. These letters written c.45-55 AD describe the early Christians as being "In Christ" or that Christ lives in them. They are part of His body the Church, as living stones in a spiritual temple. All this apparently as the result of a rumour! Winston Churchill would have said "some rumour!" The theory resembles a pyramid built upside down.

The eminent Biblical scholar, NT Wright maintained that the Resurrection of Jesus provides the only adequate explanation for the birth and growth of the Christian Faith. It also throws light on the way we date our history into BC and AD. The first term is largely historical-"Before Christ". It has little significance apart from being a marker. The second. "AD-the year of our Lord" is theological, indicating that people saw meaning in the event, "Lord" or "Kurios" being the term used by the first Christians in worship and especially in baptism. In short, though some scholars may query isolated incidents, no one can produce an equivalent explanation of the Resurrection story than the body of evidence we have in the New Testament.

Some see the significance of the Resurrection in its moral and spiritual effects on believers. The first disciples, according to them, recovered their faith after the crucifixion. Jesus' example and teaching inspired them to follow his ways to the extent that some said they still felt his presence with them. This has continued through the centuries and finds expression in a popular Christian hymn which says "You ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart". While acknowledging their sincerity, it is hard to see how such a faith could have brought about such expansion of Christianity especially in non- Jewish circles who had never seen Jesus. Feelings are an unreliable foundation for faith. They vary from person to person and with our circumstances. Nor could they provide much strength in times of persecution.

Others have said that belief in the Resurrection and hence the Divinity of Christ was a late development in Christian thought. Yet many of the earliest of the New Testament letters begin with benedictions from "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". How could monotheist Jews have come so quickly to associate a mere human being with such closeness with Deity? How could a dead human being bestow blessings on anybody? Why did the Gospel writers wait so long before recording the resurrection narratives and why did they give women such a prominent place in them at a time when women's testimony was not highly regarded? Moreover, the stories appear to be so mundane. Jesus does not appear in glory or perform any miracles. He spent his time eating and drinking with the disciples and teaching them. And why did Jesus leave them so soon? This pious fiction is not very pious!

None of the above interpretations pays adequate attention to the New Testament which devotes much space both to the story of the Resurrection and its implications for believers. In many of the letters to churches, the apostles talk of the Resurrection in an almost throwaway fashion, as if to imply that it was common knowledge, universally accepted among the churches and which did not need to be proved.

One might say that Jesus himself attached much significance to His resurrection. He spent a lot of time with his disciples according to Luke. What was he doing in that time? Luke recounts that he was teaching them about the Kingdom of God. He had begun his ministry by announcing its imminence and the disciples had given up their day jobs to follow him. They had spent three years

listening to his teaching and seeing his actions. Yet we get the impression that for all this they were slow learners. Their faith took an apparently mortal blow when Jesus was crucified. The resurrection must have filled them with joy and awe but they also needed a period of spiritual recuperation. Luke records that Jesus appeared to them many times in order to convince them beyond doubt that he was truly alive. They also needed to understand thoroughly the meaning of his resurrection which was, as Luke tells us, the culmination of Old Testament history and the fulfilment of all God's promises in Him.

The teaching of the apostle Paul

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians contains the longest commentary on the subject. He devotes more attention to it than to any other topic in his letters. Other New Testament writers mention it but almost in passing. Paul exegetes both the fact of the Resurrection and its implications now and in the future. He reminds his readers (another indication that they had heard this message before, and which he himself must have received much earlier, as he said) of the gospel, summarised in his words "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried and that the third day he rose from the dead according to the scriptures". Every part of this sentence is full of meaning.

The passage is more like a doxology, a paean of praise to God rather than a cold statement of fact. It is good news. "Christ" is the Greek word for "Messiah", not merely a surname. He is not an isolated individual but the One whom God had promised to redeem Israel and install His Kingdom. The entire long history of Israel, written in the Old Testament, had been a preparation for his coming. Scattered references gave hints of this but the clearest evidence is the mysterious passage in Isaiah 53 in which the author talks of the Servant of God who suffers for the sins of His people. Unjustly put to death, he somehow survives and is given great honour. The first Christians saw in Jesus the fulfilment of these words. But he did not merely die a natural death. That would prove nothing, nor did he die merely as an individual person. His death was vicarious, not only occasioned by the sins of his contemporaries but as Messiah, fulfilling God's purpose, for the sins of "Many". In this way He was bringing in the new covenant between God and mankind in which there would be forgiveness of sins, as he said in his words at the Last Supper. He accomplished something in his death! As the late Rev. Alan E Funnell used to say, "His dying was a doing".

We fail to see the "shock value" of the word "died". No one at that time, or even earlier, believed that Messiah would suffer and die. He would probably bring in the kingdom by making other people undergo this fate. Anyone wishing to invent a new "religion" would never have dreamed of saying that He would achieve this by suffering the most shameful form of death. A crucifix or cross was never an early Christian symbol. To have worn it as a decoration would have horrified them.

The inclusion of the words "was buried", though apparently superfluous, should not be overlooked. They emphasise the reality of Jesus' death and are recorded in both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. As these are carefully constructed documents it appears that Paul's summary, written much earlier, c.54AD, was already a primitive and public statement of faith and was retained in the latter two.

It is somewhat harder to detect the significance of "according to the scriptures" with regard to the resurrection. Direct references are not numerous although the phrase is sometimes used in the Old Testament to denote a time when God will do something significant. Passages in the Old Testament often "allude" to the idea of resurrection. In Isaiah the Servant of God is put to death but seems to survive although the word "resurrection" is not used. The New Testament often clarifies what the Old Testament leaves somewhat nebulous.

Paul then recounts the appearances of Jesus to His disciples. (His omissions are significant. A counterfeiter would have pictured him doing so to Pilate, and Herod, striking fear into their hearts). He did so to complete what the empty tomb meant and to revive their almost moribund faith. The word "appear" is striking. Linked to "Epiphany" it shows revelation. We do not "appear" to each other in ordinary life.

The list is widespread, including the church leaders, (and giving the old word "Cephas" for Peter), Individuals and a large gathering. This discredits the theory which stated that some of the disciples saw visions of Jesus. Individuals may see hallucinations. It is hard to fool a crowd. The appearances are different in another way. They changed the disciples' lives, sending them as emissaries of the faith to the whole of the Middle East and in many cases laying down their lives in the process.

Finally, Paul states that Jesus appeared to him also. The words he uses indicate the traumatic nature of that encounter. Unlike the other apostles, he did not have three years living with Jesus gradually absorbing his teaching. He came from far back, as a persecutor of the Church, which makes him the supreme example of grace. Thus he writes not just as an advocate but also as a witness. The resurrection changed his life radically. His subsequent work as an apostle was not just some individual ministry but the practice and belief of the whole Christian community (15:13).

The list of church leaders omits the names of the women who first came to the empty tomb. It was so authoritative that the Gospel writers did not hesitate to mention them This is another mark of authenticity. Had anyone wished to invent an account of the empty tomb he would never have mentioned women. Their position in society then was inferior to that of men and their testimony was not nearly as well accepted as that of the former.

Next, Paul faces up to what the consequences would be had the Resurrection not happened. There would then be no resurrection for anyone, preachers would have nothing to proclaim. They would be found guilty of lying about God. Faith would be a delusion

and Christians of all people the most to be pitied-a miserable lot! Yet Paul does not reply with an argument. He simply reiterates the truth of the resurrection. Fact trumps argument. An old friend of mine often said "People may defeat you in debate but they can never deny your experience".

Jesus' resurrection and the Kingdom of God

The Resurrection of Jesus is therefore more than merely evidence that there is life after death. Many societies, primitive and advanced, have believed this for millennia. It was common belief among many Jews that it would take place at the end of time. The resurrection proclaims that "Jesus is Lord" by rising now. When he came out from the tomb on that first Easter morning, the world entered a new stage of existence, a "Regenesiis". He had accomplished what He proclaimed at the beginning of His ministry that the Kingdom or rule of God was imminent. In his death he took upon himself all that the forces of evil could do and destroyed them by submitting to it. As an old poem puts it:

*"He hell in hell laid low,
Made sin, he sin o'erthrew. `
owed to the cross, destroyed it so, And death by dying slew".*

This is why so many Easter hymns are songs of victory.

Secular funerals offer do not offer the hope which Christian funerals bring. They recount the life of the deceased but then come to an abrupt halt. Christian funerals may include all the afore mentioned but they add the "differentia", as Doctor Cawley, a former Principal of Spurgeon's College, used to say, of hope beyond the grave. While sympathising with those who grieve, we trace the rainbow through the rain and anticipate fuller life. Why grieve for this? It is therefore not strange that such services often end with the greatest of all resurrection hymns "Thine be the glory" (although "the strife is o'er, the battle done" runs it a close second).

The resurrection established the identity of Jesus. When he began his ministry, people saw him only as an untrained rabbi. He announced that the Kingdom of God was about to appear and began to demonstrate this by dramatic healings. These were generally welcomed although it was not long before a whispering campaign began against him, "Who does he think he is?", because of his teaching authority, his apparent disregard for many Jewish traditions and his claim to forgive sins. The disciples' view was more "Who is this man?" after the stilling of the storm. Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi acknowledged him as Son of God although he probably saw this in terms of the Messianic King of Israel. The triumphant entry into Jerusalem added to this impression although these hopes were dashed by the Crucifixion. Had they been mistaken? Had Jesus after all been cursed by God as Deuteronomy in the Old Testament said? The Resurrection removed these doubts. Paul told the Galatians that Jesus had indeed born the curse but it was for them, bringing new hope as 1 Peter 1:1 says. Paul uttered the definitive word when he wrote that Jesus had been declared Son of God by a great act of power through the resurrection from the dead.

The Resurrection also expanded their view of the nature of God. The apostles always affirmed, as good Jews, their monotheism. Yet in the earliest of the NT letters the authors speak of God and Jesus in the same breath (Gal 1:1). He is worthy of worship.

His title as "Lord" - the word used for God in the Greek Old Testament-bore evidence that the One who overcome death, the last enemy, was more than human. It was later generations of Christians who "creedified" their beliefs. The first generation were too busy evangelising to produce exact formulae about God. They were, however learning from experience that there was more to God than they had hitherto thought. The same applies to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. When some say that the word Trinity is not found in the New Testament we can agree. However, all the materials are there for later generations to state it explicitly.

The Resurrection of Jesus and the promise of new bodies for us

The resurrection prefigures our future state of existence. The Fall affected every part of our nature both body and mind. Redemption reverses, restores and exalts this. The Saviour came in human flesh and "returned" in a body. He was recognisable although sometimes only with difficulty. He ate, drank and conversed with the disciples but his body seemed to possess strange powers, being able to appear and disappear at will. The powers of the age to come were seen in him and this has implications for the future of believers. It is to be a bodily existence. We are a body-mind continuum and cannot exist otherwise. Here the resurrection counters the belief, commonly held now as then, that at death the spirit flies away to a spiritual existence in heaven. The Greeks had a saying "Soma sema" - "the body is a grave". It is difficult to see how disembodied spirits can do anything which demands a body, even play harps, and an eternity spent doing nothing is hardly good news. The Gospel offers us the hope of life in a deeper relationship with God and each other. It also promises us renewed bodies free from the shackles of sin, weakness, disease and possessing perhaps powers of which we are unaware at present. Isaac Watts states this succinctly in his hymn:

*"Then shall I hear and see and know,
All I desired or wished below;
And every power find sweet employ In that eternal world of joy".*

"Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished".

Hamlet

The resurrection and Pentecost completed the revelation of God to mankind. In the Old Testament He was known as the great Creator, holy and righteous, who had chosen Abraham and made a covenant with Israel and had promised to dwell in the Temple yet when Solomon dedicated it to Him (1Kings 137) he had expressed doubts that even this would not be an adequate dwelling for Him. God had planned to do something which no Jew could have ever thought possible. The Creator entered His world as a creature.

The New Testament shows that the real Temple was to be seen in Jesus: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us", sharing our humanity, as Jean Ingelow's hymn puts it:

*"Whose feet have toiled along our pathways rough,
Whose lips drawn human breath".*

He plumbed the depths of human life even to the point of death as Principal; Cawley used to say "Jesus was not fully incarnate until he breathed his dying breath". God is not remote. He has revealed Himself fully in Jesus whose life was all of a piece with His death, not as was the case with Sidney Carton in "A Tale of two cities". Thus our picture of God must be framed around Jesus. The paradox of divinity reveals Him as both the God who judges sin yet suffers for it. He is most in control when He seems helpless, most powerful when He is weakest, most defeated when He dies yet most Lord when He emerges from the tomb. Moreover, as He was raised as a man, the Ascension shows that He had somehow taken up mankind into the Godhead! As Paul says in 1 Timothy "Great is the mystery of godliness".

The Resurrection and the Spirit outpoured

The resurrection was a necessary precursor to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus promised this as the fulfilment of his mission which was to change the nature of religious experience. For faithful Jews religion consisted largely in obedience to the Mosaic Law, and observing Passover, Temple and synagogue worship. Pentecost took this a stage further by giving disciples an inner experience of the presence of Jesus. This universalised His activity in the world. They now possessed much more than memories of his life and ministry and this would equip them for service world-wide.

The resurrection initiated the abundant life which Jesus offered. Reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins, power to live righteously and the hope of immortality brought them into a new togetherness which they called the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It brought Jews and Gentiles together in a hitherto unknown way. It showed itself in new care for the poor, the sick and outcasts of society. It also drove them to spread the Gospel as widely as possible. Wherever they went they translated the Scriptures into local languages, so laying the foundation for mass literacy, universal education and medical services. As time has gone on, even people who did not share their faith began to do similar works of charity. John Ortberg in his book "Who is this man?" gives scores of examples. The Gospel leavened society.

They were not perfect. Sometimes they disagreed with each other and parted company. They were slow to perceive and address contemporary evils such as slavery, child exploitation, the darker side of industrialisation and colonialism. At times they sought to achieve conversions by means of power or even by force of arms, rather than by love. Even today the record of church history is a mixed one. Nevertheless, the leaven of the Kingdom which Jesus spoke about has made the world a better place and they often led the way for reforms of society.

Their proclamation of Jesus as Lord came into a world which already had a lord. His name was Caesar. People were sometimes obliged to show their loyalty to the Empire by offering sacrifices and confessing that "Caesar is Lord". The early Christians who had uttered their baptismal faith had to choose between two masters. Jesus had told them that no one could serve two masters. Those who refused to bow the knee to Caesar ran the risk of capital punishment. The story of many of the martyrs shows that they did not fear this because their Lord had already conquered death. Every other "lord" would eventually die.

Every generation has its own Caesar whether this be an individual, a political system or the pressures of society. Some Christians have bowed the knee to Baal but others have always seen the significance of the Resurrection and have remained true. "Now we need not fear the grave" The Church has often grown despite their suffering or perhaps because of it. North Korea and Iran are recent examples of this. Moreover their resistance has sometimes led to reduced persecution and the collapse of dictatorships, replacing them with forms of democratic government which if not perfect could be termed the least worst alternative.

Some individual believers have been enabled through the Resurrection to achieve remarkable things for the Kingdom. Wellesley Bailey in Ireland, for example, stirred by the plight of leprosy sufferers in India began a ministry of help and comfort which has grown to a fellowship of 1,200 workers who have healed and blessed thousands. William Carey, C T Studd, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Brother Andrew, Robert Arthington of Leeds and, fortuitously, Mary Jones and her Bible, are but a few of his noble army, from different countries. By far is the larger number of Christians, in many lands, who have been "nudged" by the Holy Spirit to do great works which have rarely been publicised.

The Resurrection and the authority of Jesus

The Resurrection finally established the authority of Jesus. His public Kingdom work had begun with the baptismal Voice which had proclaimed him to be both anointed King and Suffering Servant. He had pursued his ministry in both roles simultaneously despite the growing opposition until it reached its climax on the Cross. There he achieved the victory over sin by apparently surrendering to it and winning by apparently losing. Love had triumphed over brute force and ill will. The resurrection made overt what had previously been hidden and some of Jesus' final words to his disciples were "all authority has been given to me on earth and in heaven". The disciples could have agreed with the last few words but were later to experience the truth of "on earth".

Their first clash was with the Jewish Establishment. It had engineered Jesus' crucifixion but now it had to face men who defied them and who spoke with the same authority as their Master. They would rather obey God than man and suffered persecution and scattering accordingly. This resulted in a further spreading of the Gospel into Samaritan areas and then Gentile territory. It is almost certain that Jesus had spoken to them about this but they had been somewhat slow to obey him. The forces of antagonism had helped to spread the Gospel. Later they had to face the wrath of the Roman Empire. When later they found themselves alone in "foreign parts" they would need to be absolutely convinced that Jesus was alive. They also needed to understand fully what the Resurrection meant. This is why the forty days "finishing course" was vital to their subsequent ministry.

The Resurrection and our service for God

The final section of Paul's examination of the resurrection seems to end on a somewhat mundane note. Having established the fact of the event and having examined its cruciality he looks to the future. In a series of brief statements, he compares our bodily state now with that which we hope for after death. He builds up a crescendo of expectation somewhat as Ravel does in his "Bolero". Having said finally that death, the last enemy, will be destroyed, we wait for the final note to be like a spectacular display of spiritual fireworks which would astonish everybody. Instead he utters the prosaic words "Keep busy always in your work for the Lord". The fact of the resurrection is intended to be of practical importance to believers.

This correlates with his earlier words in 1 Corinthians 15;2, "You are saved by the Gospel if you hold firmly to it". This is what we need. The greatest event in history, if it does not affect our lives for good now, is a mere spectacle. A mere exhortation, if it is not based on something outside ourselves, can neither inspire or energise us. Paul strikes the right note in "nothing you do in the Lord's name is useless". Sometimes our work is useless. When we do it for ourselves or from unworthy motives, it can come to nothing. If done "in the Lord's Name", even the least action will achieve some of God's purposes.

Horatius Bonar sums this up well in his hymn which begins, "We thank Thee Lord for using us for Thee to work or speak" and which ends with the words,

*"O honour higher, truer far Than earthly fame can be,
Thus to be used in such a work, So long, by such as Thee".*

This is the significance of the Resurrection.