

Whom God Raised

Acts 4:1-10

We have, this morning, every reason to want the resurrection to be true. In our youth we encounter the notion that this man Jesus, crucified for our sin, was quite unusually lifted out of death when he was three days into it. And, desiring ourselves to be lifted out of death someday, we easily accept the notion.

When I hear of the local teenage girl, who through a shocking case of diabetes wakes up one day in the hospital with both of her arms and her legs amputated, I want the resurrection to be true. The newborn theory that dominates minds today, that we are the result of an evolutionary process that does not love us, and that can offer us nothing after death but non-existence—all that is within us rages against that possibility when we see this girl.

And what are we to do when the diagnosis of stage-three cancer, which we have pitied on the news, is suddenly spoken to our face, and we are its object? Then Easter is not just another Sunday—it is a day that contains the condensed substance of all our deepest longings.

We have nowhere else to go but to this hope, however wild it is, that in Jesus we might be resurrected with new and pristine bodies, free of flaw and ailment, and live forever in that state with him.

But, you understand, wanting something to be true does not make it so. There are many other wants you have, some stronger and some weaker, and their appearance in your heart, their formation even in your mind, can do nothing to alter the world as you find it.

The devout adherent to Jainism, who on Wednesday of this past week celebrated his most important holiday, Mahavir Jayanti, is persuaded that through absolute non-violence he may be delivered from a cycle of reincarnations—that will be his liberation, and that is his hope.

Yet his hope is a delusion; he has made it up out of his own head, and in his head it must stay—it cannot touch reality.

What then of the resurrection that we so much want? Have we invented it because we have so much wanted it?

We need not fear to ask these questions. God knew what we would ask before we ever did, and he has made a full and satisfying reply, which we find in our text today.

Prior to what we are about to read, the apostles Peter and John had healed a man who was crippled from birth, and, with him standing by, they were teaching and preaching Jesus in the Jerusalem temple.

ACTS 4:1-10

There is no new thing underneath our sun—those who are skeptical of the resurrection have been with us since the day it happened. And here, not long afterward, we find skeptics again. Let us begin then our sermon today with them, those who are skeptical about the resurrection. Afterward, we will consider the apostles' defense.

The Skeptics' Question

So, first, the skeptics, both then and now.

Then

Then, in the year of our Lord thirty-three or so, the skeptics were the Sadducees. Verse 1 introduces them: "As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them."

Last week we were involved with the Pharisees, and now we find their counterpart. The Sadducees were fewer in number than the Pharisees, but the Sadducees had wealth and nobility on their side, for many of them sat contentedly on the highest rung of Jerusalem's social ladder.

And whereas most Jews wanted to throw off their Roman overlords, the Sadducees took advantage of that lordship. They were Rome's yes-men and bootlickers, and consequently Rome appointed many of them to the highest positions of leadership in Jerusalem. The great council known as the Sanhedrin, before which Peter and John are to be tried in verses 5 and onward, is made up mainly of Sadducees. Those names there listed, "Annas the high priest...and Caiaphas and John and Alexander," are all Sadducees.

But what most interests us about the Sadducees this morning is this: they were skeptics of the resurrection. In the twenty-third chapter of Acts we find written, "the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit." And that is why, in our present text, verse 2,

they are “greatly disturbed because [Peter and John] were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.”

Do not think that evolutionary naturalism is an idea new with us today; it existed in a less sophisticated form among the Sadducees. “When you die,” they said, “that is all. We cannot know if anything should happen afterwards, but you most certainly will not be resurrected.” And they are bothered that they should be contradicted before the public by uneducated men.

Now

Our circumstances are little different today—these are the same claims set against us, that there is no resurrection. Well then, let’s enter verse 5 with Peter and John—we might as well be the ones on trial. We are seized in the temple, and after a good night’s arrest, we and the healed cripple are brought into a building. Around us, semi-circle, cross-legged on a raised platform, sit seventy-one of the highest human authorities we know, the rulers and elders and scribes and high priestly persons of our nation.

And disbelieving in the resurrection, they ask their question: “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?” That is, who has authorized and enabled you to heal this cripple, and then, presumably, to preach the resurrection in the temple? The Sadducees have posed their question to Peter and John.

Here then we should consider some modern objections to the resurrection. We will let the Sadducees of our day ask their questions and raise their doubts, we will stand in their midst, and then we, with the apostles, will reply.

So then, we listen as the high priest of the modern skeptics opens his mouth:

You say there is a resurrection of the dead. Then answer me these two things.

First, considering that most cultures have come up with some sort of immortality myth—the Egyptians were embalmed that they might live on in another world, the Hindus have made up reincarnation, the Muslims have their Paradise, and so forth—don’t you think it likely that every culture has fabricated a different such tale simply to deal with their fear of death? Your

belief in a resurrection, that of Jesus and your own, is nothing but a terror management technique.

Secondly, we now know that the human body is composed of seven billion, billion, billion atoms. And we know that every person is ever gaining new atoms by eating and losing old ones by shedding. There are some who estimate that every year we replace 98% of all our atoms. So then, when you die and are to be resurrected, which atoms will God bring together again to make you anew? What if some of your old atoms have sunk into the ground, then served as nutrient for a growing plant, which plant was eaten by another person, and thus your old atoms have become part of him or her?

Our skeptics have finished their questioning. What, will we begin to feel unsettled? Do Peter and John, confronted by society, made the victims and target of the learned elite, pressed by the encircling Sanhedrin, hang their heads in doubtful shame and remain silent?

The Apostles' Reply

They do not, and neither shall we. We have endured the ignorant remarks of worldly men, those who are willing to rouse the leviathan and parade their tongues across the earth for their earthly cause; and can we say nothing on behalf of heaven? So help us God, we shall make some reply.

Note first that answer of the apostles, on the tongue of Peter. He has been arrested for preaching the resurrection, but he is questioned about his healing of the cripple which led to that preaching. We find his reply, in verses 8 and following:

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health.'

Here we begin our own defense.

Then

What evidence did Peter set forward for the resurrection of Jesus? Was it a complicated, metaphysical argument weaved with the thinnest threads of minute reasoning? No—it was an easy fact, clear to the wisest of men and to the simplest. It was the cripple.

Only, we cannot call him a cripple any longer, for he is walking. Apparently he too was arrested and brought to trial the next day, and Peter points his finger at him and says, “Look, here is your evidence. Here is a reply to all your delicately balanced arguments. How does this long-time lame man walk? By the name of Jesus, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead!

“You thought, when you had crucified Jesus, that he like all other men would stay dead. You thought that you had ended the words and the workings of this Jesus of Nazareth. But look, he has done another miracle! And if he has done another miracle, then he cannot be dead.”

It worked this way: the Sadducees had seen Jesus work miracles but then had thought to put out his wick by crucifixion. Miracle, miracle, miracle, death...miracle!

I think we are meant to find humor in this circumstance: the high priest and his wise companions are seated around two fishermen and a cripple. They have reasoned, intricately I’m sure, against the resurrection in their own minds and most fully disbelieve it. They disbelieve that Jesus was resurrected, or that anyone ever could be.

Yet even as the high priest mutters his question, can he help but look uncomfortably aside at the cripple? The council may reason together, the rulers of the earth take their stand and wax eloquent against the Lord and against his Anointed and against his resurrection; but when they look up again, there is the cripple. There he is, with perhaps a childlike and ignorant grin across his face. There stands the cripple—yes, there he *stands!*

Notice verses 14 to 16:

And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they began to confer with one another, saying, “What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.”

The skeptics had their many theories for why the resurrection could not be; but Peter had his one proven fact, and that trumped them all. They could say, "Resurrection from the dead is impossible!" And Peter might reply, "Well, so is a walking cripple."

Now

Here is the basis of our argument this morning. I do not now come to you hoping to prove the resurrection of Jesus Christ with superiority of speech or of wisdom. I am with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching are not in persuasive words of wisdom. No, rather, my message and my preaching are in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. Men of higher mind than I have ascended to elevated peaks of philosophical thought, but I dare not venture after them. I can only stand on this solid earth, point my finger and say, "Behold, the cripple walks!"

Conversion

We have, in all probability, never seen a cripple walk, but we are witnesses of a far greater miracle than this, in comparison with which a walking cripple seems not so amazing a thing. And it is this which recommends the resurrection to us. I have never seen a cripple changed, true; but I have seen a sinner changed.

I have known a young man who would qualify as a modern Pharisee. I distinctly remember once, when he felt slighted, how he took acute pleasure in the pain which he caused a teacher by a well played silent treatment. And how, when he feared that his secret sins might expose him as a hypocrite, he exerted all his efforts to extinguish them but absolutely could not.

And then how, after one desperate evening of broken prayer, this cripple walked. I am not speaking of mild behavioral reforms, but of the flooding in of desires never known before, and which cannot be explained with any word lower than "miracle." To see him now, you might ask in wonder, "Isn't this the one who used to sit at the temple gate to beg alms? What has happened to him?"

To which I must reply, "I do not know exactly what has happened; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

For those who would contradict this evidence, let me remind them, first, that this is no isolated event. If you would like eyewitness testifiers to such miracles, they are sitting within a few seats of you. And, though now they are seated and in their right mind, if you had known them

before the miracles took place, if you could see their old thoughts and words and actions laid before you, you would be astonished.

Secondly, let me call to the skeptic's mind the difference between this change and all others. All other changes can be explained without resorting to miracles, because all other changes are in line with a person's natural desires.

Someone may be seeking physical pleasure by an immoral and promiscuous life. But then he discovers the teachings of Islam and finds that, if he will keep the Five Pillars, or if he will sacrifice himself as a martyr, he may go to Paradise and have seventy-two black-eyed virgins. So the man restrains himself and reforms his behavior—but you see, his heart has not changed. No miracle was necessary, only persuasion.

The walking cripple is of an altogether different species. He is the one among the crowds in the temple—he knows the danger of believing, for he has just watched Peter and John be arrested for it. But he, with so many others, believes anyways.

Jesus looks at him and says, "If you want to be my disciple, you must surrender all else that your heart desires. You must be willing to expose and forsake your Pharisaic hypocrisy, even if you lose the praise of men with it. You must not hold fast to your wealth but give it freely. And you must do it, not merely so that you may gain a happy place in heaven, but so that you may gain me, even if you were to get nothing more."

And the one upon whom Christ has worked his miracle will say, "Yes! I will take up my cross and follow, and count all my earthly attainments and possessions and sufferings as garbage if only I may gain you, Christ." What? Why? Because his heart itself, his very character and make up, has literally been altered by the Spirit of God. The old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. His earth-ward desires have been overwhelmed by a newly implanted affection.

So, for we who are Christians, the resurrection should be no hard thing to believe. The skeptic asks, "What? Do you really believe that when you are dead, God will bring you back to life?" And we must say, "Well, he's done it once before." When we were dead in our trespasses and sins, he made us alive together with Christ. And the one who worked this miracle of life can and certainly will do the same again, but this time with our physical bodies.

Nature

Ah, don't you see, this same miraculous power we witness all around us. We do not believe in a resurrection only because we have had a peculiar experience at one dire moment in our lives, but because, as a result of that one moment, an entirely new world has been opened to us, a world full of the miraculous.

And so the argument that a resurrection is improbable or unlikely slides right off our backs, because we realize that nothing in this world is probable or likely. How probable is a tree? How likely is the ocean?

When the universe was formless and void, and God began his great work of craftsmanship, it is good that we were not there to be his counselors.

As he prepared to sprinkle the deep, black sky with his crystal luminaries, the stars, we, sitting around him like the Sadducees of the Sanhedrin, would have objected: "No, no, it is impossible to make large, bright rocks float upon nothing. And so many as you propose, all in one moment—there is no evidence that such a thing has ever been done before, or that it ever will be." But then we would have to look at the cripple standing, for in a moment all the stars would be made to glitter in the canopy of heaven.

And God's intention to create animals after their own kind, full grown on the earth? "We object. Science removes all possibility of this ever happening. Matter is neither created nor destroyed. Besides this, species can only come to be after so many billion years of development." But then there they are, standing on the earth.

When God is introduced into the question of resurrection, all opposing arguments dissolve. Someone asks, "How could all your atoms be reconnected?" And we reply, "How could all my atoms be connected in the first place?" Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead? He is God, let him do what is good in his eyes.

And yes, we Christians are not immune to doubt in this matter of a resurrection; but neither are atheists. They are doomed to live beneath the same majestic sky as we. And when we or they walk along an outdoor path, head down and wondering whether a resurrection could ever really be, we must at some point raise our head and see the sky, and ask ourselves, "But how could *this* ever be?" The cripple is always standing there, smiling, dispelling all our well reasoned suspicions.

Conclusion

What then can we say to all these things?

Let it be known to me and to all of you, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name these many evidences stand here before you.

By the living Jesus Christ himself the multitudes have been miraculously altered, this preacher included; through the living Jesus Christ himself all the miraculous members of nature were created, and he now holds them all together; and in Jesus Christ, I will die and then live again; as surely as he himself has uttered these words: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies.”

We who have been pardoned by the blood of Jesus Christ, we whose many evils have been atoned for by his death on our behalf, we who have experienced, by faith, the cripple’s miraculous change, what can we say? I know what I will say, what a great theologian has said before me: “Put me six feet in the ground and watch the great escape.”

When I hear what I have heard, only the other day, on a video of the Al-Shabaab terrorist group that recently stormed a university in Garissa, Kenya to hunt down and kill Christians, when I hear one of their leaders say this to his suicidal men:

When we fight and are martyred, we hope to be with God in Paradise. We are hoping for beautiful women. What are the infidels hoping for? Nothing.

Ah, when I hear this, my heart burns within me and this earnest thought appears: “Well then, let us prove to them, by our blood if need be, that we infidels are indeed hoping for something.”

Let us prove that in Jesus Christ we are assured of a resurrection, and let us prove it not by obeying some natural, non-miraculous desire for revenge, but by doing as Jesus has taught us: by loving our enemies, even unto our own deaths. Oh that God would send out from our midst missionaries to the terrorists, and to the cannibals, and to those countries which are closed and hostile to our gospel. This is what Easter frees us to do. And when in hope we can do this, then the world will wonder at these cripples, and give glory to God.

Is this too heavy a thought? Do not fret—Jesus means the resurrection to be a comfort and a peace to us. Christian, in our beloved Savior we

have now, most certainly, attained the quest of all mortals: immortality! And not in fiction or in dream only. It is as surely ours as are the clothes we wear.

You weakest, trembling saints who feel you can hardly bear the weights of this life, much less the heaviness of death—here is an eternal spring for you. Why let your physical limitations bother you any longer, or your mental maladies cause you distress? Are you taken aback by the decay of your body? All will be shortly remedied. I think, if you are of a doubtful temperament and have lived long in a gloomy mental storm, or have long endured a hard and persistent disease, Jesus will be all the more delighted to see the happy surprise upon your face when you are resurrected.

Finally, for you who are foreign to this hope and to this Jesus of Nazareth, I end my defense as Peter ended his: know this, that there is salvation in no other name, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved. Ah, no other name, but there is this one name, that of Jesus Christ. Come to him, cripple though you may feel yourself to be, and you will live, and will live again.