



Easter Sunday, April 12th 2009

A Cynical Hope

¹ We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³ For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” ⁴ *For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.* ⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Romans 15:4-7 (ESV)

Jacob's Well is a Christian Community which exists for the glory of God and the good of the city by extending hope through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

My Notes

Cynical and Hope Together?

Despair and hopelessness

Pollyanna Naivety?

The Effect of the Stories We Live

The Balance of the Scriptures

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Romans 15:4 (ESV)



*Gospel
Centered*

*Thoughtfully
Engaged*

*Life in
Communion*

The Reality of Easter

Community Meditation

- Does your personality tend more towards despair/cynicism or towards a more positive outlook?
- How does the gospel help us grasp hope in a world that remains so troubled?
- Hope in money, power, good health etc. are always temporary and will come to an end. Have you found yourself putting your deepest hopes in these things?
- What if Jesus was God come to earth and really rose from the dead? What would keep you from trusting and following him? Pride? Fear?
- Got questions? Drop them to us at info@jacobsWellNJ.org



The Junk Drawer... Extras for the Road

The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth

Introduction

Perhaps the most enigmatic figure in all of history is that of Jesus of Nazareth. More songs have been written about him, more literature written, more artwork commissioned and more buzz created surrounding this one figure than any other in all of history. Each year around Easter the pundits, scholars and documentaries all rev up again to discuss the identity of Jesus and the fantastic realities which surrounded his life. There is no more important event in history than the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and its reality continues to be debated and discussed year after year.

Let me begin by making something very clear. In the normal course of life, dead people do not get back up and walk around again. It is uncontroversial that dead people stay dead, it is a truly radical thing for a dead person to rise. The testimony of the early Christians was that a miracle occurred, that God raised Jesus of Nazareth back to life. This miracle was the center point of their trust in God and they proclaimed this news throughout the entire known world. In this short essay we will look at this event from several angles. First, we will look at the historical nature of the Christian faith and some realities surrounding the resurrection event. Second, we will look at how many attempt to explain away a real resurrection and how these explanations fall miserably short of making sense of history. Finally, we will look at several theological implications that the resurrection holds and how these deeply impact our hope and joy in our lives today. So let us begin by walking back into history together.

The Roots of the Christian Gospel

Christian faith is not rooted in fantastical mythology that took place in some unknown past or in some ethereal metaphysical realm. The events that birthed and shaped the Christian gospel are very much rooted in space, time and history. In fact, the Christian movement is founded upon the person of Jesus and the events that surrounded his life on earth. Jesus' early followers established the church on a simple but profound message that is found in their writings and creeds. One such early creed is found in a letter written by a leader named Paul to a community of Christians in the ancient city of Corinth.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, 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 at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8 (ESV)

From this we see that the central focal point of the Christian message is the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Later in the same letter, Paul goes so far as to say *if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins* (1 Cor 15:17) The resurrection of Jesus therefore is of utmost importance to Christianity and even resurrection skeptic Gerd Lüddeman openly acknowledged that “the resurrection of Jesus is the central point of the Christian religion.”¹ So the question which has been asked for centuries is this: *Did it really happen?* What follows is a short treatment of some facts involving the resurrection which must be accounted for by anyone seeking to understand the events from the days immediately following the death of Jesus.

Historical Realities

#1 The Death of Jesus—For there to have been a resurrection, there had to be a person living who actually died. Though there are some folk out there who may be skeptical about

the existence of Jesus, their claims have no grounding in history. In fact, the life and death of Jesus are attested in the non biblical writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, the Roman historian Tacitus, the Greek satirist Lucian as well as the Jewish Talmud.² The fact that Jesus lived and died is incontrovertible.

#2—The Empty Tomb — The earliest documents we have record that the tomb of Jesus was found empty by a group of his women followers. Historically, there simply is no burial place of Jesus. Though spiritual leaders' grave sites are places of worship for followers of various religions, there simply is no place to visit Jesus. The story of the empty tomb is in the earliest writings of Christianity and therefore not a later legendary invention. The early opposition of Jesus never produced a body or even a written account about showing forth a corpse which would have easily refuted their preaching. There is simply nothing but historical silence on the issue. Furthermore, rather than refuting the empty tomb story, the earliest opponents actually produced a counter story to explain the lack of a body (they said the disciples must have stolen it—more on this in a bit). Finally, the early Christians record that a group of women followers were the eyewitnesses who found the tomb empty on the first Easter morning. At first glance to a modern person, this seems a bit boring, but we must think with a 1st century mindset. Both Greeks and Jewish people at the time had a miserably low view of the testimony of women; so much that it was inadmissible in any sort of judicial proceeding. If the story by the early Christians is a fabrication it would have been seen as ridiculous to create the story of women being the first witnesses to resurrection. The only explanation to why they would have written this is that a group of women actually reported they found the tomb empty. Finally, an empty tomb alone is just empty, but an empty tomb along with others seeing and interacting with the living Jesus is a more interesting reality.

#3—Eyewitness Experiences and Changed Lives —A third fact surrounding the resurrection event are the experiences and changed lives of the early Christians. They claimed to have seen and had real life experiences with a living Jesus after he had died. The early creed in 1 Corinthians 15 records that Peter and numerous other disciples experienced something which they described as the risen Christ. In the canonical gospels we have Jesus eating with people, given final instructions and his friends embracing him physically (See Mark 15, 16; Luke 24; Matthew 28; John 20-21; Acts 1;). These experiences of the early Christians literally transformed their lives from cowering followers of an executed leader to bold preachers of a risen God and King. Finally, it was not merely his friends who were impacted and changed, it was also enemies and skeptics. Saul of Tarsus was a strict adherent to Judaism and then became one of the key leaders of the Jesus movement. His explanation was that he had met the risen Jesus (See Acts 9) James, the brother of Jesus, goes from being a skeptic to a Christian pastor and worshipper of Jesus as God. It is not normal to convince your brother that you are God. Yet it seems James understood the risen Jesus to be no mere man and became a devoted worshipper so much as to give his very life for his Lord/brother.³

NT Wright, a leading scholar on Christian origins rightly places these two realities together when thinking about the emergence of Christian teaching on the resurrection:

The two things which must be regarded as historically secure when we talk about the first Easter are the emptiness of the tomb and the meetings with the risen Jesus...Neither the empty tomb itself, however, or the appearances by themselves, could have generated the early Christian belief. The empty tomb alone would be a puzzle and a tragedy. Sightings of an apparently alive Jesus, by themselves, would have been classified as visions or hallucinations, which were well enough known in the ancient world. However, an empty tomb and appearances of the living Jesus, taken together, would have presented a powerful reason for the emergence of the belief⁴

Along with Jesus' death, the empty tomb, the appearances, changed lives of friends, skeptics and opponents, the birth and emergence of Christian faith is also powerful historical testimony to the resurrection event. We'll touch on a few interesting facets of the early days of the Christian movement.

#4—The Birth of the Church and Its Worship — It is quite interesting to think about what brought about the birth of the Christian movement. The testimony of the Christians was that resurrection and commissioning of Jesus gave it birth. What we find in the very first decades of Christian faith are two fascinating facts. First, we find that the first Christians, all who were devout Jews, abruptly moved their day of worship for the Sabbath (Saturday) to the first day of the week (Sunday). Their reason for doing this was that Christ rose on Sunday morning. Anyone who understands historic, devout Judaism knows what a massive and seismic move this would have been. The 10 commandments dictate that the Sabbath be a day of rest and this is to be on the 7th day, Saturday. Yet we find an almost instant change in a centuries old tradition and custom. Why? Furthermore, we also find their Jewish monotheists begin to worship Jesus as God. Not simply as a god, as any good polytheist would permit, but as G_D who had created the universe and covenanted with the Jewish people. This is utterly amazing and the Christians saw the resurrection of Jesus to be a divine action of God that took place in their midst. These seismic shifts and the beginning of the Christian movement are explained by the resurrection miracle. Without this event we are left dumbfounded and groping for an explanation as to why there is a thing called Christianity at all.

Explanations—Attempting to Remove the Miracle

Most of these historical facts are actually agreed upon by both skeptical and believing scholars of early Christianity. Yet all do not believe in a physical, historical resurrection. Other explanations for the historical record are offered and we will treat only briefly the most common explanations. We have no space to do these justice here, so I will refer you to further reading in the books found in the notes.

Legends and Lies — Some skeptics will claim that the Christians invented the resurrection of Jesus after his crucifixion in order to create a believable mythology and religion. There are several problems here. First, the Christian teaching was resurrection from day 1, it is not a later embellishment and we have textual reasons to believe some of this material is within a decade of Jesus' death. Second, nobody believed or found plausible a bodily resurrection theory in the ancient Roman empire; it was not a popular idea among ancient people. Many Greek and Roman ideas held that the soul needed to be freed completely from bodies rather than being resurrected into a new one. Furthermore, the Jewish sect known as the Sadducees, did not even believe in resurrection. It would have been a ridiculous story to make up as the ideological world of that time simply would not have welcomed it.⁵ Additionally, the story of women discovering the tomb would have been a terrible choice for legend makers as it would have made the testimony highly implausible. Finally, some attempt to say that the Christians borrowed the story of resurrected savior gods from pagan religions and were engaging in a “me too” game of god-making. Interestingly enough, Edwin Yamauchi, professor of ancient history at Miami University, has written convincingly that none of these so called parallel stories is remotely similar and almost all of them are dated *after Christianity*. In some cases these religions actually adopted their mythology *in response to* Christian teaching. We highly recommend Dr. Yamauchi's excellent essay *Easter: Myth, Hallucination, or History*.⁶

Okie Doke of the Body Snatchers and the Lost Tomb—The earliest story involved the stealing of the body of Jesus from his tomb. This means the disciples were some sort of tricky liars that would have made the Oceans 11 crew look sheepish. They would have created the hoax and then all died horrendous deaths for a lie they created and from which they gained nothing but trouble. Others have held that those looking for Jesus got lost and could not find the right tomb despite the fact that prophets and religious leaders tombs were literally worshipped in the ancient world. Additionally, the tomb belonged to a prominent man name Joseph of Arimathea so it is hardly likely that its location was unable to be found. Yet the empty tomb was not that which convinced people of the resurrection alone. It was appearances of Jesus *to them* which convinced the disciples, his women followers, Paul and James.

Resuscitation not Resurrection — Another theory, at times called swoon theory or resuscitation theory, holds that Jesus was crucified and put in a tomb but really did not die all the way. Perhaps he was only *mostly dead* in a Monty Python sort of way. When Jesus was alone in the cold, dark rock tomb, he woke up, removed his grave garments and popped out to punk his disciples. There are two problems with this. Crucifixion and the preaching of the early church. First, Roman garrisons charged with killing people, killed the people. It was not permitted to not have them die. Jesus was both scourged and crucified both horrendously painful and certainly lethal. Further, the biblical accounts hold that a spear was thrust through Jesus' side in order to make sure he was *dead* dead not *mostly* dead. Additionally, the customary burial process of the time would have had Jesus wrapped in all sorts of cloths and spices. He would have stripped them off, pushed a stone closure out of the way and then appeared to his followers triumphantly resurrected. This is highly ridiculous and such a "risen" Jesus would not have seemed triumphant over death but in need of a modern emergency room. Not many people put forth this idea any more.

Hallucinating Crowds—Finally, some have gone to the effort of explain the experiences of the early Christians by explaining they had visions or hallucinations based on their psychological state and wishful thinking. This has one main problem; hallucinations are a personal event not something shared by groups of people, at various times and in diverse places (See again the creed in 1 Cor 15). Hallucinations are not shared among people and are private first person experiences.⁷ Furthermore it does not explain the empty tomb or the changes in the worship of the first Jewish Christians.

Bottom Line—Could it happen? None of the theories which are offered about Jesus explain all the historical realities surrounding the resurrection event. As with many things involving faith in God, human beings at times simply do not want to believe. Some think miracles such as the resurrection cannot happen and therefore did not. Such a *a priori* naturalism is present in many at a worldview level so that no amount of reasoning will make a miracle acceptable. Yet, for those with an open mind, there are powerful reasons to believe that a miracle, a historically defining miracle, did indeed occur on the first Easter morning.

The Theological Importance of Resurrection

In closing, the resurrection has extensive importance to our faith. First, it is a vindication and confirmation of the work of God through Christ (Acts 17:31). It is also a foretaste of the Kingdom of God where life fully triumphs over death. In this way the resurrection is the first act of God's renewal from the curse of sin and death and we live in this renewal as his people today. Finally, the resurrection is a promise of our own resurrection coming when God culminates history. We will be raised to new life and with never ending hope where death is vanquished and Christ is fully King (1 Cor 15:50-58). It is in this hope that we gather each year to celebrate Christ's historical, bodily and triumphant resurrection on Easter Sunday. With our brother Paul we now stand together before that great enemy of death and joyfully talk trash "Death, where is your victory, where is your sting!"

This my friends is much better news than what comes from the Easter bunny.



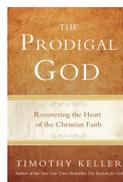
Notes

1. Quoted by William Lane Craig in Copan and Tacelli, *Jesus' Resurrection, Fact or Figment—A Debate Between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann* (Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press, 2000) 31.
2. Gary Habermas and Mike Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004) 49, 50.
3. Habermas and Licona, 68, 69.
4. NT Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2003) 686.
5. See chapters 2-4 of the extensive *The Resurrection of the Son of God* by NT Wright for a copious summary of beliefs about death and after life in the ancient world. For a shorter 14 page summary of Wright's argument about the resurrection and its relationship to the rise of the church, see *Jesus' Resurrection and Christian Origins* at www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Jesus_Resurrection.htm
6. Edwin Yamauchi, *Easter: Myth, Hallucination, or History?* Available online at www.leaderu.com/everystudent/easter/articles/yama.html
7. For a fuller treatment of psychological/hallucination/vision theories see Habermas and Licona, 104-119. Gary Habermas' website has many helpful articles on all things Resurrectional as well—<http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/articles.htm>

For the Fam...

Welcome

If today is your first time at Jacob's Well we want to extend to you a warm welcome. Make sure to fill out an info card and pick up a welcome pack with some basic information about our new church. We also have a free book for you as a gift from the Jacob's Well family.



Financial Stewardship

The finances of JW receive oversight from a board of directors as well as a budget team of our people. We collect an offering each week in the silver paint bucket in the back of the room. When we launch out in Sept each week's giving and our budget needs will be made available at this spot in the program. Thanks!

Next Weekends Happenings

Saturday, April 18th

Elijah's promise provides meals and services to the community in New Brunswick and some Rutgers art students are helping to show some love to the place by painting an art mural at their soup kitchen. Join in the fun from 12-4 at 18 Nielson St. New Brunswick, NJ 08901.

Help the Priddys move: 4:30pm—60 Patterson Street, Skyline Tower. We'll move a few loads then grab dinner together.

Sunday, April 19th

We'll gather together for worship and teaching next Sunday at the Monaghan House: 10:30am 3 Esther Ct, North Brunswick NJ 08902.

See the summer schedule below for our monthly services here at the Days Hotel and Conference Center.

Summer Series at the Days —Cynical Hope

Join us this summer at Jacob's Well as we seek an enduring hope...



April 12th—*A Cynical Hope*

May 17th – *The Struggle for Hope*

June 14th – *Deepening Hope*

July 12th – *Deepening Hope—Part Deux*

August 9th – *Hope Arriving*