

Resurrection 101: Resurrection in the First Century and the Resurrection of Jesus

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YEAR A • THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:14a, 22–32 • Psalm 16 • 1 Peter 1:3–9 • John 20:19–31

HISTORY



A. D. 2014, Sunday, April 27th

- ☞ 8:00 a.m. • St. John's Episcopal Church; Wichita, KS
- ☞ 10:30 a.m. • St. John's Episcopal Church; Wichita, KS

The Sermon

1810 words • ?? minutes

Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed!*

Let's try that again.

I will say, "Christ is risen!" and you will say, "The Lord is risen indeed!"

Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed!*

Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed!*

Now, if you were here on Easter Sunday, you probably know what's coming next.

I will say, "Christos aneste!" and you will say, "Alethos aneste!"

And in good liturgical fashion, we will do this three times in a row.

Christos aneste! *Alethos aneste!*

Christos aneste! *Alethos aneste!*

Christos aneste! *Alethos aneste!* Amen!

Okay, you can be seated now. You earned it.

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

Now I don't know if you happen to notice, but our first reading this morning did not come from the Old Testament, but from the Acts of the Apostles. And so it will be for the entire Easter Season.

Today's reading from Acts takes place on the fiftieth day following the Resurrection. Peter stands up and addresses a large crowd of Jews who have traveled to Jerusalem, from all around the Roman Empire, to celebrate the Jewish Feast of Weeks, also known as, Pentecost. And in his speech, Peter proclaims *the* central truth of the Christian faith: God raised Jesus from the dead. God raised Jesus from the dead.

It is no exaggeration to say that, had Jesus not risen from the dead, there would be no Christianity. In fact, without the Resurrection, I doubt that we would even know the name of Jesus. For without the Resurrection, Jesus would have been just one among the thousands of Jews who were put down by Rome and whose names have been lost to history. Without the Resurrection, there would be no gospels, because gospels aren't written for false prophets, failed revolutionaries, and messianic pretenders. Moreover, without the Resurrection, there would be no forgiveness of sins, no defeat of death, no hope for the future. For as Paul argues in 1 Corinthians,

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 COR 15:17–19).¹

So again, Jesus' resurrection is *the* central conviction of the Christian faith, it is the foundation of the Christian claim to truth. It is worth asking, then: What do we mean by resurrection? What do we mean when we say that God raised Jesus from the dead? What are we saying when we proclaim, "Christ is Risen! The Lord is risen indeed!"?

RESURRECTION 101

These are important questions, and so this morning, I would like to offer a little Resurrection 101. And the place to begin is with how the term "resurrection" was used at the time of Jesus.

Resurrection as Uniquely and Peculiarly Jewish

The first point to be made is that, in the first century, the idea of resurrection was a peculiarly Jewish notion, a notion that was, in fact, regarded as ridiculous or even offensive by the rest of the Greco-Roman world.

Resurrection as One of the Views of Life after Death

The second point to be made is that, within first-century Judaism, there were a variety of views about what happened to people after they died, and resurrection was just one view on a continuum.

So, on one end of the spectrum were Jews who believed in an eternal state of disembodied bliss following death. This view was heavily influenced by the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul, the idea that the soul escapes the prison of the physical body upon death. The ancient Jewish philosopher, Philo, held to this view.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, were Jews who denied any continued existence after death. When you're dead; you're dead. The Sadducees, it appears, held to this view.

Somewhere in between these two views was the notion of resurrection, which is the view of life after death that the Pharisees, along with Jesus and his followers held to. Resurrection was the belief that God would someday destroy sin and death and in so doing restore the whole of creation to its

¹ Consider also, "We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ -- whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised" (1 Cor 15:15).

original created state. And when that happened, God would resurrect all the righteous who had died. That is, God would restore the physical bodies of the dead, so that they could enjoy and participate in the New Creation.

Now this idea of resurrection raised a question, for first-century Jews, which was this: What happens to the righteous in the time between their death and the resurrection at the end of the age? Where are the dead now? Answers to this question varied. Some Jews said the dead were in asleep in their graves, waiting to be awakened. Others said that those who had died were hanging out in Sheol, the land of the dead. While others insisted that the righteous were “with God” until the resurrection at the end of the age.

In other words, while resurrection referred specifically to the physical re-embodiment of human persons at the end of history, some Jews envisioned a temporary disembodied existence between one’s death and the general resurrection. But, and this is an important point, the word resurrection was never used to refer to people in this temporary disembodied state. Other words were used. You might refer to the souls, the angels, or the spirits of persons who had died, but you would never describe them as resurrected.

Resurrection Summary

Now before moving on, let me just summarize what we have said. And here I am quoting the biblical scholar, N. T. Wright,

Though there was a range of belief about life after death [in first-century Judaism], the word resurrection was only used to describe reembodiment, not the state of disembodied bliss. Resurrection was not a general word for “life after death” or for “going to be with God” in some general sense. It was the word for what happened when God created newly embodied human beings after whatever intermediate state their might be.²

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

I have taken the time to lay this all out because today there is so much misinformation and confusion about the nature and reality of Jesus’ resurrection. This is largely due, I think, to the fact that the word “resurrection” has come to be used in a variety of general and/or metaphorical ways. So, for example, I hear Christians saying, “I believe that Jesus was resurrected spiritually, but not bodily.” But there is simply no such thing as a “spiritual resurrection,” a nonphysical, non-bodily resurrection. Resurrection always, always refers to a physical re-embodiment of a human person. Speaking of a spiritual resurrection would be like ordering a cheeseburger from McDonald’s, without the cheese. Okay, I know that’s not a great analogy, but you get the point.

Similar arguments have recently been put forward by some biblical scholars. Take, for example, Marcus Borg, who is well-known within Episcopal circles. Borg is interesting on this issue because he does not deny the possibility that Jesus *could* have been raised from the dead bodily, he just doesn’t think that it matters. He writes:

Whether Easter involved something remarkable happening to the physical body of Jesus is irrelevant. . . . To be sure, resurrection could involve something happening to a corpse; but it need not. Thus, as a Christian, I am very comfortable not knowing

² N. T. Wright. *The Challenge of Jesus*. 134.

whether or not the tomb was indeed empty. Indeed, the discovery of Jesus' skeletal remains would not be a problem [for my faith].³

So here, Borg sees himself as affirming Jesus' resurrection, yet he has completely redefined the meaning of resurrection. He says that his faith would not be affected in the slightest were Jesus' bones discovered in a tomb in Jerusalem, but it certainly would have affected the faith of the first disciples.

Without the empty tomb combined with the resurrection appearances, Jesus' disciples would have never proclaimed that God had raised him from the dead. Had Jesus' body remained in the tomb, his disciples might have continued to believe that he had been sent from God, for they had seen him perform some remarkable deeds while he was alive. They probably would have argued that he had been unjustly condemned. They might even have claimed that Jesus was now with God in heaven as a righteous martyr. But they would never have proclaimed, as Peter did on Pentecost, that God had made this crucified Jesus both Lord and Messiah, the one who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. It is the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus that did that, that lead his followers to claim and proclaim what they did.

So, for example, when Thomas is finally given the gracious gift of seeing the resurrected Jesus, he exclaims, "My Lord and my God." In other words, the resurrection of Jesus and his lordship go hand in hand. So, whenever we pray to the Lord Jesus Christ, whenever we bow our head at the mention of our Lord's name, we are in fact affirming his resurrection, we are bearing witness to the fact that God raised him bodily from the dead, that he is Lord of all, and therefore, he is the one to whom we owe our lives and must pledge our soul allegiance.

CONCLUSION

And so, using the words of today's Scriptures, let me say: You who are Christians, and especially you who are Episcopalians, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested... by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him...this man, handed over according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, [was] crucified and killed.... But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.... Therefore let the [whole Church] know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus [who was] crucified, dead, and buried."

And so, "blessed are [you who are sitting here today, you] who have not seen and yet have come to believe." "Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

So now, with one voice let us with all boldness and humility proclaim the central truth of the Gospel:

Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed!*

Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed!*

Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed! Amen!*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

³ Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, 131.

The Scriptures

YEAR A • THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:14a, 22–32

Psalm 16

1 Peter 1:3–9

John 20:19–31

THE COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

ACTS 2:14A, 22–32, 36

Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the multitude, "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know-- this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him,

‘I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover my flesh will live in hope.

For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.

You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

“Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying ,

‘He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.’

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.”

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

- 1 Protect me, O God, for I take refuge in you; *
I have said to the LORD, “You are my Lord, my good above all other.”
- 2 All my delight is upon the godly that are in the land, *
upon those who are noble among the people.
- 3 But those who run after other gods *
shall have their troubles multiplied.
- 4 Their libations of blood I will not offer, *
nor take the names of their gods upon my lips.
- 5 O LORD, YOU are my portion and my cup; *
it is you who uphold my lot.
- 6 My boundaries enclose a pleasant land; *
indeed, I have a goodly heritage.
- 7 I will bless the LORD who gives me counsel; *
my heart teaches me, night after night.
- 8 I have set the LORD always before me; *
because he is at my right hand I shall not fall.
- 9 My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices; *
my body also shall rest in hope.
- 10 For you will not abandon me to the grave, *
nor let your holy one see the Pit.
- 11 You will show me the path of life; *
in your presence there is fullness of joy,
and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

1 PETER 1:3–9

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

JOHN 20:19–31

When it was evening on the day of Resurrection, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the

Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.