

The Resurrection Con't

there are three essential components to the New Testament's proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that together present a reasonable defense of that claim that is simultaneously consistent, coherent and convincing: 1) the discovery of the empty tomb; 2) the appearances of the Risen Lord to His male and female disciples; and 3) the transformation of the disciples into the apostles who boldly proclaim the Risen Christ to the world, and the beginning of the New Testament Church.

The Empty Tomb. Christians do not believe in the empty tomb. Yet Christians believe that the tomb of Jesus must have been empty for them to convincingly announce His resurrection from the dead. The empty tomb in itself simply revealed the fact that something happened to the body of the crucified Jesus. The empty tomb needed to be interpreted.

Not expecting the resurrection of her Master, Mary Magdalene's first reaction was to seek a "natural" interpretation for the empty tomb: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him" (John 20:2).

That the tomb of the dead Jesus was found empty on the "first day of the week," following His crucifixion and burial, is now universally acknowledged as a sound historical fact. Even scholars who do not believe in the resurrection of Christ accept the account of the burial of Jesus and the discovery of the empty tomb. The former Roman Catholic and Jesus scholar, Geza Vermes, offers a good example of this basic consensus: "When every argument has been considered and weighed, the only conclusion acceptable to the historian must be that the opinions of the orthodox, liberal sympathizer and the critical agnostic alike—and even perhaps of the disciples themselves—are simply interpretations of the one disconcerting fact: namely that the women who set out to pay their last respects to Jesus found to their consternation, not a body, but an empty tomb."

And, of course, no one has ever claimed to have produced the corpse of Jesus. Whatever one may make of Saint Matthew's account in 27:62-66, it is clear that the propaganda concerning why the tomb of Jesus was discovered to be empty presupposes the acceptance of the empty tomb in the first place. The counter-claim of the Jewish authorities—the "stolen" body of Jesus—was another appeal to a "natural" reason as to why the tomb was empty.

But the appearance of the angel[s] within the tomb, recorded by all four evangelists, begins to point well be

yond these natural explanations into the mysterious realm of God. For it is God Who acted in both an unexpected and also shatteringly decisive way by transforming the tomb into a womb from which emerges new and everlasting life.

It was the women disciples of Jesus who first heard the Gospel of new life from within the tomb. As prominent New Testaments scholars such as Raymond Brown, N.T. Wright, and William Lane Craig further point out, the discovery of the tomb by a group of women – the Holy Myrrhbearers – is a very convincing piece of evidence for the veracity of the canonical Gospels' account of the initial discovery of the empty tomb. This is because the witness of women was not binding according to the Law in first century Judaism.

The early Church would not have imaginatively given the privilege of discovering the empty tomb to witnesses who unfortunately were thought to be unreliable. In fact, according to Luke 24:11, the apostles initially thought that their words were "an idle tale." (Did the apostles ever get anything right until they saw the Risen Lord and began to believe in Him?)

With the kerygmatic proclamation of the angel from within the tomb, we are introduced into the Good News which has changed the world once and for all: "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, Who was crucified. He has risen, He is not here; see the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him, as He told you" (Mark 16:6-7). This sets the stage for the appearances of the Risen Christ to His disciples.

The Appearances of the Risen Lord. The appearances of the Risen Christ provide the needed interpretation to the empty tomb. The tomb is indeed empty because Jesus has been raised from the dead as the angel proclaimed! This is the dawn of the "new creation" and the "death of death."

Each Gospel ends with at least one chapter (there are two in Saint John) narrating one or more appearances of the Risen Lord to His female and male disciples. These appearances initially overwhelmed the disciples, and we hear of different reactions "gladness" (John 20:20), "worship" and even "doubt" (Matthew 28:17). In a marvelous expression in Saint Luke's Gospel, we even hear that the disciples "disbelieved for joy!" (Luke 24: 41). There is also an initial non-recognition in some accounts (Luke 24:16; John 20:14).

The sheer unexpectedness of the crucified, but now risen Lord, appearing to His disciples must account for some of these reactions. Yet, regardless of these initial reactions, the disciples are completely convinced that it is Jesus raised to new life and now in their midst as their "Lord and God" (John 20:28).

From our vantage point today, it is virtually impossible for us to comprehend this experience of the first **Con't Page 10**

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disciples of Christ. The resurrection of Christ was—and remains—a mysterious, unprecedented and eschatological event. Perhaps this is what accounts for the lack of that narrative flow and continuity we encounter in the narrative of the suffering, death and burial of Christ. The evangelists were hard-pressed to relate “the unrelatable” within the confines of our human language and images. At times, it seems as if language itself breaks down in its struggle to narrate the events of the appearances of Christ.

For we discover in the Risen Lord both “continuity” and “discontinuity.” It is the crucified, dead and buried Jesus Himself Who is raised from the dead (“You seek Jesus of Nazareth”), a fact born out by His still visible wounds (John 20:20, 27); and that He even takes food together with His disciples (Luke 24:42).

Yet, there is a great deal of transformation in the Risen Lord: He appears and disappears at will, and closed doors are not obstacles to those appearances (John 20:19, 26; Luke 24:31). Saint Mark even informs us that He appeared “in another form” (Mark 16:12). When we take into account the complementary aspects of continuity and discontinuity revealed in the Risen Lord, then to speak of His “physical” resurrection can be misleading and open to skeptical dismissal.

This is because a “physical” resurrection can be misconstrued as a “mere” *resuscitation*—and hence *resumption*—of earthly existence as we experience it in the here and now of this world. And that was the case when Jesus raised to life the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Nain, and his dear friend Lazarus. They all died again, after being brought back to life by the restorative power of Christ. The Lord, however, was resurrected to undying and eternal life: “For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him” (Romans 6:9).

For this reason, it is much more biblically sound to speak of the “bodily” resurrection of Christ, so as to maintain the essential distinction between *resurrection* on the one hand, and mere *resuscitation* on the other, that may be attached to the term “physical.”

The term “bodily” will also serve to strengthen the reality of transformation that occurs in the resurrection, for the Lord is raised from death in a “spiritual body” according to the theologically nuanced expression of the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15:42-50). Raised to life in a spiritual body, the Risen Lord reveals to us the glorified life of the Age to Come. In theological language, we refer to this as

an “eschatological reality.” (This means an event reserved for the end of history being disclosed within history). And by grace, we will share this with the Lord in “the life of the world to come.”

What is being stressed here, however, is that the disciples know that it is Jesus once they see Him following His resurrection. This is all summed up by Saint Luke in the second volume of his narrative history of Christ’s ministry and the beginning of the Church’s existence: “To them He presented Himself alive after His passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

The Transformation of the Disciples and the Beginning of the New Testament Church. Something has to account for the evident transformation of Christ’s disciples. They are portrayed in the Gospels in a painfully unflattering manner, based not only on their obtuseness during the ministry of Christ, but also on their cowardly failing to remain with Him in the hour of His suffering and death. They literally abandoned their Master, and Peter openly denied even knowing Him. But in a very short span of time, those very disciples were transformed into apostles who would carry the Gospel to the “ends of the earth.”

At the very heart of that Gospel was that Jesus had overcome death itself by His resurrection, thus inaugurating a new creation and the promise of eternal life with God: “But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2:24).

Crushed by the brutal and “cursed” death of their Master, and together with Him of their hope that Jesus was the Messiah, fearful and hiding behind closed doors for “fear of the Jews” (John 20:19), the messianic movement centered in Jesus was as dead as He apparently was lying in the tomb. A crucified, dead and buried Messiah was not only meaningless, but completely incoherent from the Jewish perspective.

Something of great significance must have happened to make any sense of the disciples’ newfound faith, boldness and, finally, willingness to give their own lives for what they would proclaim to the world. Conspiracies and/or collective hallucinations are inept explanations that are now treated as more or less eccentric theories. (Most of these “theories” cancel each other out, so one is left with one choice or another).

In their desire to maintain objectivity, but to also make some sense of the evidence provided to them, historians and scholars must face this historically unprecedented and baffling mystery of the origins of the Christian movement. For all of the “data” tells us that this movement should never have even started! **Con’t Page 11**

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When they carefully examine the evidence and try and come to some conclusions as to the foundational cause of this new faith centered in Jesus of Nazareth – a condemned criminal put to death by the authority of the Roman Empire in the relatively remote and insignificant area of first century Judea – these very historians and scholars must provide a convincing alternative theory if they are not willing to accept the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead.

A fair question then forms itself naturally: taking into account the beliefs of first century Judaism concerning the possibility of a crucified Messiah, issues of “life after death,” and the Jewish belief in the resurrection from the dead at the end of time; just how convincing are any of those alternative theories? Perhaps that is why some major New Testament scholars, such as E.P. Sanders, without committing themselves to an active faith in the resurrection of Christ, are at least conceding that the disciples of Christ were convinced that they saw Him alive following His death on the cross, and that they then acted on that conviction.

To return to an initial point, I do not believe that Christians should attempt to compel faith in Christ by a careful gathering of the evidence concerning Christ’s resurrection from the dead. This is not a courtroom trial. And Christian faith is not based upon the “jury’s” verdict. A commitment to Christ as the Crucified and Risen One Who has “trampled down death by death and upon those in the tombs bestowing life” begins with faith, based on trusting the witness of the apostles of Christ—a witness for which they were prepared to die.

This trust slowly begins to transform each Christian so that that faith is a living and personal faith. As that faith matures, all Christians may reach a point when they can make their own the words of the Apostle Paul: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Yet, the Christian claim is that God acts within human history, that God enters into the time and space of our world to create, sustain and redeem us as the Lord of history Who has prepared a glorious future for us. The ultimate manifestation of that divine activity within the world is revealed in the Incarnation of the eternal Son of God. And His death and resurrection from the dead fulfills the promises of God as He remains faithful to His faithless people throughout history.

This historical aspect of our Christian faith means, to repeat this again, that any historical evidence that can disprove the resurrection of Christ would immediately and definitively undermine that faith. But no such evidence exists. On the

contrary, it points us toward the genuineness and authenticity of those very claims – incredible and “unbelievable” though they may initially appear.

Rivers of Living Water by Fr. Stephen Kostoff

“So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city....” [John 4:28].

A Samaritan woman came to Jacob’s Well in Sychar, a Samaritan city, at the same time that Jesus sat down by the well, being wearied by His journey. The evangelist John provides us with a time reference: “It was about the sixth hour” [John 4:6]—i.e. noon. The Samaritan woman had come to draw water from the well, a trip and activity that must have been an unquestioned daily routine that was part of life for her and her fellow city-dwellers. The ancients had a much more active sense of equating water with life than we do today with the accessibility of water from the kitchen tap, the shower, or the local store. On the basic level of biological survival, Jacob’s Well must have been something like a “fountain of life” for the inhabitants of Sychar. Therefore, it is rather incredible that she returned home without her water jar, a “detail” that the evangelist realized was so rich in symbolic meaning that he included it in the narrative recorded in his Gospel [John 4:5-42]. And this narrative, together with the incredible dialogue embedded in it, is so profound that every year we appoint this passage to be proclaimed in the Church on the Sunday of the Samaritan Woman, the Fifth Sunday after Pascha. Why, then, would the Samaritan woman fail to take her water jar home with her?

Her “failure” was based on a discovery that she made when she encountered and spoke with Jesus by Jacob’s Well. For even though the disciples “marveled” that Jesus was talking with a woman [v. 27], Jesus Himself began the dialogue with the woman perfectly free of any such social, cultural or even religious restraints. As this unlikely dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman unfolded by the well, it was revealed to the woman that Jesus was offering her a “living water” that was qualitatively distinct from the well-water that she habitually drank [v. 11]. This “living water” had an absolutely unique quality to it that the Lord further revealed to the woman: “Jesus said to her, ‘Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life’” [v. 13-14].

A perceptive and sensitive woman who was open to the words of Jesus, she responded with the **Con’t Page 12**

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clear indication that she had entered upon a process of discovery that would lead her to realize that she was speaking with someone who was a prophet—and more than a prophet: “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw” [v. 15]. Her thirst is now apparent on more than one level, as her mind and heart are now opening up to a spiritual thirst that was hidden but now stimulated by the presence and words of Jesus. Knowing this, Jesus will now disclose to her one of the great revelations of the entire New Testament, a revelation that will bring together Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles: “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship Him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” [v. 23-24].

A careful reading of Saint John’s Gospel indicates that under the image of water, Jesus was speaking of His teaching that has come from God, or more specifically, to the gift of the Holy Spirit. For at the Feast of Tabernacles, as recorded in John 7, Jesus says this openly to the crowds that had come to celebrate the feast: “On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, ‘If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ Now this He said about the Spirit, Whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” [John 7:37-39].

Overwhelmed and excited, inspired and filled with the stirrings of a life-changing encounter, the Samaritan woman “left her water jar, and went away into the city and said to the people, ‘Come and see a man Who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?’” [v. 28-29]. It is not that the contents of her water jar was now unimportant or meaningless. That would be a false dichotomy between the material and the spiritual that is foreign to the Gospel. The Samaritan woman will eventually retrieve her forgotten water jar and fill it with simple water in fulfillment of her basic human needs. For the moment, however, she must go to her fellow city-dwellers and witness to Christ! They, in turn, will eventually believe that Jesus is “indeed the Savior of the world” [v. 42].

There are indeed innumerable “wells” that we can go to in order to drink some “water” that promises to quench our thirst. These “wells” can represent every conceivable ideology, theory, philosophy of life, or worldview—in addition to all of the superficial distractions, pleasures, and mind-numbing attractions that offer some relief from the challenges and oppressive demands of life. For a Christian, to

be tempted to drink the water from such wells would amount to nothing less than a betrayal of both the baptismal waters that were both a tomb and womb for us; and a betrayal of the living water that we receive from the teaching of Christ and that leads to eternal life. It is best to leave our “water jars” behind at such wells, and drink only that “living water” that is nothing less than the “gift of God” [John 4:10].

SPIRITUAL WISDOM

A contemporary Elder – and the founder of the Sacred Monastery of the Precious Forerunner in Essex, England – Archmandrite Sophrony Sakharov of Russian descent, had made the following comment to one of his spiritual children as they watched the construction of a church that was being built within the grounds of the Monastery:

“It is a difficult thing nowadays to build a temple. It will rouse all the demons.” He then continued with an anecdote that he had heard in Russia:

“There once was a person who had gone to Hell, but who wanted a church there so that he could pray. In spite of his sinfulness, he loved God and wanted to pray. So he began to measure a spot where he intended to lay its foundations. A devil came up to him and asked him what he was doing. He replied: ‘I want to build a sacred temple here, so that I can pray.’

This upset the devil, because it was not possible for a church to be built in Hell. So he tried to hinder him. He was unsuccessful, so he called over some other devils, but they couldn’t stop him either. Then they called for their leader. After that, a swarm of devils gathered there and they threw him out of Hell, so that he wouldn’t build the church.”

The Elder then concluded:

“We likewise build churches in order to convert Hell into Paradise; but, if we don’t succeed, we will (at least) have succeeded in not being accepted into Hell by the devil.”

Christ Is Risen!

Indeed He Is Risen!