

The Resurrection of Jesus (Lesson for Easter, 2021)

I. Today is Easter Sunday

- a. In the U.S. and many other English-speaking countries the annual celebration of the resurrection of Jesus is called 'Easter', while in most of the rest of the world it is called 'Pascha' (referring to the Passover, the Jewish story from Exodus involving the Passover or Paschal Lamb). This was the season when Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead.
- b. According to Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, our English word 'Easter' comes from an old Saxon word that comes from the German word 'Ostern'. That was apparently a reference to a pagan goddess associated with a pagan spring festival!
 - i. It should be no surprise that many of the odd customs associated with Easter in our culture (rabbits, hiding colored eggs, etc.) have pagan origins as well.
- c. When my family lived in Albania, the custom was to greet someone you met on this day with the proclamation, "He is risen!"; to which they would respond, "He is risen indeed!" The same custom is found in Greece, which is adjacent to Albania, as well as in other countries in that part of the world.
- d. I have seen Christians observe this day in a variety of different ways.
 - i. Growing up in the Roman Catholic church, here in the U.S., we followed many traditions regarding church worship, dress, decorations, special meal, etc., on this day.
 - ii. On the other hand, in many Churches of Christ this holiday is pretty much ignored and treated as any other Sunday. That is because there is no specific mention in the New Testament regarding special annual observance of this day. Also, ignoring this holiday may be in reaction to the pagan-tainted practices of many Catholics and Protestants.
 - iii. In a church I attended for many years, this day was always associated with a special evangelistic push to get more non-Christian visitors to attend our church (since many people are willing to attend on Easter or Christmas than at other times of the year).
 - iv. In our house church, we are trying to figure out the most appropriate way to observe this day. We take some inspiration from the early Christians in that regard.

II. The Rising Sun

- a. This morning we gathered at a nearby park on a lake before sunrise. David Adams led our thoughts in singing, praying and reading Scripture passages associated with the resurrection of Jesus.
- b. David read several passages of Scripture earlier this morning, including:
 - i. The **Genesis 22** story where Abraham is called to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Isaac carries the wood to the place where he is to be sacrificed. He is then placed on the wood.
 1. In **Hebrews 11:17-19** it speaks of this event and says that Abraham figuratively received Isaac from the dead (foreshadowing the resurrection).
 - ii. The story of Jonah, from **Jonah 1-2**. He is cast into the sea, where he is swallowed up by a whale. Praying in the whale, he cries out saying, "Lord, I am in Hades", and asks to be rescued from there. He is delivered from the whale and returned on the third day.
 1. When asked to give a sign, Jesus pointed to this story, saying that "as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish three days and nights, so will the Son of Man be three days and nights in the heart of the earth". (**Matthew 12:38-40**).
 - iii. The story of Daniel in the lion's den, from **Daniel 6**. The Jewish prophet is cast into the pit of death, even though he has done nothing wrong. The king goes to the pit first thing in the morning and is surprised to find that the prophet is alive.
- c. There is an ancient Christian custom to gather at sunrise, which is associated with the time that the women first went to the tomb on Sunday morning and discovered that Jesus had just risen from the dead (**John 20:1-2**).
 - i. As we gathered this morning, seeing the sun rising gradually in the east, the signs in the heavens (the return of the light of the world) reinforced the message from Scriptures we were reading.
 - ii. Jesus rose at daybreak on the first day of the week.
 1. This calls to mind the passage from **Isaiah 9:1-2** that is quoted in **Matthew 4:12-16**, which speaks of *the great light that dawned* upon those who sat in darkness, who were living in the region of the shadow of death.

2. This also reminds me of passages we discussed at length in a recent lesson (*Hail the Sun of Righteousness*, 12/27/2020).
 - a. In **Malachi 4:1-3** (designated **Malachi 3:19-21** in the LXX) it speaks of the “Sun of Righteousness” who will “arise with healing in his wings”.
 - b. Read **Psalm 19:1-6** (designated **Psalm 18:1-7** in the LXX).
 - i. The heavens declare the glory of the Lord.
 - ii. The early Christians saw this description of the sun in the sky as a figure of Christ coming into the world.
 - iii. The early Christians believed that Jesus, upon his return, would be coming from the east. They based that understanding on His statement: “For as the lightning *comes from the east* and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.” (**Matthew 24:27**, NKJV)
 1. For that reason, they would tend to pray facing the east (and when building their church buildings, construct them to face to the east).
 - d. We look to the east and await the return of Jesus as we see the sun rising. The sun rising in the east presents a figure in the sky of the resurrection and return of Jesus. God preaches the gospel to us even from the heavens.

III. The Resurrection of Jesus is the Most Important Event in History

- a. *The entire Christian faith hangs on this one event*, according to Jesus and Paul.
- b. Either it happened, or it did not.
- c. In my own wrestling with the faith in my late twenties, as one who had become an agnostic and was reconsidering the faith from the ground up, the ultimate question before me was: Did Jesus rise from the dead on the third day, or not?
- d. Read **John 2:13-22**.
 - i. According to Jesus, His rising from the dead on the third day would be *the proof* of his authority.

e. Read **Matthew 12:38-40**.

- i. The only sign that would be given: the sign of the prophet Jonah.
- ii. The sign: rising from “the heart of the earth” on the third day.
 1. Jesus was in Hades before He was resurrected, so “in the heart of the earth” has the same meaning as “Hades”.
 2. We can see this from reading **Acts 2:25-32**, where Peter quotes from **Psalm 16** (designated **Psalm 15** in the LXX). There, Peter says that the soul of Jesus was not “left in Hades”.

f. Read **Luke 24:1-48**.

- i. Raised at sunrise on Sunday, the third day.
- ii. Empty tomb.
- iii. Appeared later that day to two disciples, then to the apostles.
 1. Said he had fulfilled the prophecies in suffering and being raised from the dead.
- iv. This was a physical resurrection of the flesh. He was not a ghost nor a disembodied spirit.
 1. He had “flesh and bones”. He showed them His hands and feet (which had been pierced by the nails when He was crucified).
 2. Jesus challenges the apostles: “Handle me.”
 3. He ate fish and honeycomb with them.

g. Read **1 Corinthians 15:1-8**.

- i. This is the gospel: The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, in fulfillment of the prophecies.
- ii. Note that Paul points to *two things as solid evidence* for believing in the resurrection of Jesus.
 1. Fulfilled prophecies.
 2. Multiple reliable eyewitnesses (hundreds of people; many endured torture and death and maintained their consistent accounts).

h. Read **1 Corinthians 15:14-18** and **15:31-32**.

- i. If Jesus was not raised from the dead:

1. We are still in our sins.
 2. Our faith is useless.
 3. Paul is a false witness about God (= a liar).
 4. Of all men, we are the most pitiable.
- ii. The reason to embrace the Christian faith is because Jesus rose from the dead, and we therefore have hope in eternal life. Our motivation *should not* be based on anticipation of any benefits we might receive *in this life*.

IV. The Claim of Jesus' Resurrection: Only Two Possibilities

- a. *Both* involve accepting a *conspiracy theory*.
 - i. These days there has been a lot of discussion, especially on the left and right of the political spectrum in the U.S., about conspiracy theories.
 1. A conspiracy theory is the idea that a small group of people are involved in advancing a deliberate, coordinated lie in order to push an agenda among the rest of the population.
 2. Modern conspiracies in the U.S. involve all sorts of things, include claims of conspiracies related to:
 - a. The John F. Kennedy assassination;
 - b. Assassinations of other high-profile leaders (Martin Luther King, Robert F. Kennedy, Malcom X, etc.);
 - c. The Clintons;
 - d. George Soros;
 - e. Bill Gates;
 - f. The Covid pandemic and associated response of the governments;
 - g. The outcome of the U.S. 2020 election;
 - h. The 9/11 attacks, most notably on World Trade Center in New York City;
 - i. Etc., etc.

3. Many of us strive to *avoid* being considered a 'conspiracy theorist' in the public arena, especially with all the negative associations and loss of credibility and respectability associated with that label.
 4. However, when we look at the story of the alleged resurrection of Jesus on the third day, we find *two* competing claims of conspiracy.
 - a. Which of the two sides is right?
 - b. Put another way, which group was engaged in pulling off a conspiracy?
- b. Read **Matthew 27:62-66** and **28:11-15**.
- c. The two competing stories were, therefore:
- i. EITHER Jesus actually rose from the dead on the third day
 1. In which case the Jewish leaders were engaged in a conspiracy, bribing the guards and making up the false story that the apostles stole his body at night.
 - ii. OR the apostles stole the body of Jesus at night as claimed by the Jewish leaders and the Roman guards.
 1. In which case the apostles conspired together to steal the body and then to spread a false report about Jesus being raised from the dead.
 2. Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, recounts a debate between Justin (a Christian from Samaria) and a group of Jews that took place over 100 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. The Jews in the discussion believed that Jesus was a real person, a Jew who had been crucified. However, Justin remarks that in their day the Jews were *still spreading the story* that the apostles had stolen the body of Jesus.
 - a. (Source: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, chapter 58; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 108)
- d. Early Christian writer Eusebius, in *Proof of the Gospel*, book 3, chapter 5 (written c. 320 AD) makes an interesting case, using reason and logic to explore this question of who is telling the truth.
- i. Eusebius begins by taking the position of assuming that the Jews were right, namely that the apostles were lying and were engaged in a deceitful conspiracy. Then he reconstructs the kind of speech that

would have had to been given to propose the conspiracy; and demonstrates how incredibly unlikely that would be!

1. Eusebius asks a rhetorical question of his readers.
 - a. Would anyone, knowing what just happened to Jesus (being tortured and enduring a brutal death by crucifixion) commit to spreading something *they knew was a lie*, while preaching the highest moral standards (cannot lie, cannot lust, no other gods) and spread that message around the world?
 - b. After agreeing on this deceitful scheme, the apostles would then have had to agree to spread this message to all the kingdoms of the world (including Rome, Parthia, India, Africa and beyond):
 - i. The gods that you and your forefathers have worshiped for centuries are fraudulent. They do not exist.
 - ii. You must follow our Lord, who was crucified.
 - iii. You must give your possessions to the poor, love your enemies, always tell the truth.
 - iv. You cannot retaliate when attacked.
 - c. The apostles would have nothing to gain personally by spreading this lie (they would be poor, suffer, travel far from their families and homes, be persecuted and killed). They would have everything to lose (in this life) by doing this.
 - d. They saw what had just happened to Jesus; and could only anticipate that they would see a similar fate.
 - e. And the apostles would endure all this for something that *THEY KNEW WAS A LIE*?
 - i. How likely, how believable, *is that*?
 - ii. Further, consider that none recanted, even under extreme torture.
- e. Which of the two conspiracies is believable, and which is not?
 - i. The answer is obvious.

- ii. We have two sources of reliable evidence on which to base our confidence that Jesus' resurrection actually happened:
 1. The eyewitness accounts; and
 2. The fulfilled prophecies.

V. **Everyone (Enemies/Friends; Jews/Christians/Romans) Agreed...**

- a. Jesus was a real person.
- b. He had a reputation for performing wonders and miraculous signs.
- c. Eusebius, writing c. 320 AD in *Proof of the Gospel*, book 3, chapter 5 quotes from Jewish historian Josephus:
 - i. "And here it will not be inappropriate for me to make use of the evidence of the Hebrew Josephus as well, who in the eighteenth chapter of *The Archaeology of the Jews*, in his record of the times of Pilate, mentions our Savior in these words:
 - ii. "And Jesus arises at that time, a wise man, if it is befitting to call him a man. For he was a doer of no common works, a teacher of men who reverence truth. And he gathered many of the Jewish and many of the Greek race. This was Christus; and when Pilate condemned him to the Cross on the information of our rulers, his first followers did not cease to revere him. For he appeared to them the third day alive again, the divine prophets having foretold this, and very many other things about him. And from that time to this the tribe of the Christians has not failed."
 1. (Original source of the Josephus quote: Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, chapter 3; written c. 93-94 AD)
- d. Jesus was crucified, died and was buried. The tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers.
- e. However, on the third day, the tomb was found to be empty. No body of Jesus. (Even in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, c. 160 AD, Trypho the Jew recounts the story he had been told, by other Jews, that Jesus' disciples had stolen His body)

VI. **Jesus Defeated Death**

- a. There are many consequences of Jesus being physically resurrected from the dead. For one, He defeated death itself on our behalf.
- b. Read **Revelation 1:4-8** and **1:17-18**.

- i. He was dead, is alive forevermore.
 - ii. He is the *firstborn from among the dead*.
 1. Like the winner of the Boston Marathon, the first to cross the finish line is followed by many others.
 - iii. He has the *keys to death and Hades*.
 1. Hades is the waiting place for the dead, who await final judgment.
 2. Jesus went to Hades (as Peter explained in **Acts 2**), but He could not be restrained there. He escaped.
- c. Read **Psalm 110:1-2**
- i. Points made here include:
 1. There are two who are being referred to as 'Lord' in the opening words of this psalm. David said, "The Lord said to my Lord".
 - a. The second 'Lord' refers to Jesus, the Son of God.
 2. He has been raised up; and is now seated at the right hand of the Father.
 3. All his enemies will be put under His feet.
 - ii. Read **1 Corinthians 15:20-28**.
 1. Jesus defeated death; He is the firstfruits of those who have died. We will follow him, as fruit from the same tree.
 2. The last enemy to be defeated and put under his feet: death itself.
 3. The graves will be emptied.
 - iii. Read **1 Corinthians 15:42-49**.
 1. Those who follow Him will become like Him.
 2. We will defeat death as well.
 - iv. As death continues to strike those among us and those who are close to us, let us take comfort that Jesus has conquered death.
 1. The time will come when all who are in their graves will hear His voice and come out of their graves. (**John 5:28-29**)

2. He will descend with the cry of the archangel and the sound of the trumpet, and all will be raised. (**1 Thessalonians 4**)
 - a. His resurrection confirms His authority as the Son of God. (**John 2:18-19**).
 - b. He is the second Adam, who gives eternal life to all who come from Him and follow Him (**1 Corinthians 15**).

VII. One More Encouragement from the Resurrection

- a. The same power that raised Him up from the dead (the Holy Spirit, the giver of life) *dwells in us* and will raise us up.
 - i. Something miraculous and powerful happened to the lifeless body of Jesus. This was done by the Holy Spirit.
 - ii. The Spirit brought life into Mary, even though she had not known a man intimately (**Luke 1:34-37**)
 - iii. We also see the power of the Spirit of God to bring life into the dead in the story of the Valley of the Dry Bones, in **Ezekiel 37**.
- b. Read **Ephesians 1:15-21**.
 - i. The same Spirit who had the power to raise Jesus from the dead also *lives in us!*
 1. This Spirit of wisdom and understanding that Paul calls God to give us is the multi-gifted Spirit described in **Isaiah 11:1-3**.
 - ii. Paul prayed that the Christians would have more of that Spirit. May the same Spirit give us great power to live our lives for the Lord, as well.