

How do we Understand the Resurrection of Jesus?

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A few years back I began my sermon on Easter Sunday with the words “I am here to tell you categorically and decisively that Jesus did not rise from the dead”. I absorbed the somewhat stunned silence for a moment before continuing, “Nothing in the Christian story would suggest that Jesus rose from the dead. What is stated, however, is that Jesus was raised from the dead”. This is an important distinction.

Even as Jesus’ virgin birth and healing miracles are embraced as metaphor, the resurrection remains for many the one core, non-negotiable, and historical fact at the heart of Christianity. Yet the only way one can maintain an unquestioning literal interpretation of the events surrounding that first Easter is by steadfastly avoiding the reading of the Bible.

This practice leads to the aforementioned misconception that Jesus ‘rose’ from the dead. This view of the resurrection is problematic from several points. One is that it implies that Jesus had the resources to revive himself from death. If that was the case then he wasn’t actually dead, which then significantly depletes the power of the resurrection. Furthermore it can lead to the notion that the resurrected Jesus was simply a resuscitated corpse. A close reading of the text would suggest this was not the case. Close friends did not recognise Jesus; he frequently disappears into thin air and seems to walk through walls; he covered significant distances in no time at all. These are not things that purely physical beings can do. Jesus’ resurrection, although having physical elements to it, was a profoundly spiritual affair.

And it begins with God. It is God who raises Jesus from the dead. This is significant because it suggests that the power at the center of the universe, the ground of our being has embraced and endorsed Jesus’ radical message of love and vindicated that message through the resurrection. The powerful of this earth tried to silence the message by killing Jesus, and the all-powerful God brought it back to life through the raising of Jesus from the dead. This is the significance of resurrection, not a physical body picking things up where they were left off, only seemingly to have it all end again.

This is not to suggest that the resurrection was only some mysterious metaphorical affair conducted at the purely spiritual level. The resurrection had clear implications 'on the ground' as it were. Clearly *something* happened in the days following the crucifixion that transformed the disciples from uncertain followers to heralds of the Jesus message, evidently willing to die for their convictions. While we will never know the details of how the Jesus of their daily lives became the Christ presence of their future, the gospel accounts are testimony to people's hunger to know more. Whatever happened in the days following the crucifixion, the followers of Jesus were propelled into a new way of living and relating to this Galilean peasant they had been following. They were compelled to re-evaluate their Jewish heritage in ways that accounted for their experience of Jesus, both in his temporal life and as a spiritual presence in the present. And so the profoundly physical aspect of the resurrection is fleshed out in the bodies of Jesus' earliest followers.

And that is still the case. Today, the metaphor of resurrection stands for many Christians as a symbol of the call to new life, as an appeal to practice resurrection here and now. Life is precious. It's to be shared with generosity. The gospels are clear about this. What should also be clear is that resurrection isn't just limited to the experience of Jesus or to however we understand a life after death, but in passing from death to life here and now. The message of resurrection and of Easter hope is that we can live fully in *this* life, giving of ourselves, and risking for love's sake. Help someone who's hurting. Open the eyes of love for someone who is blind. Free a captive. Heal a wound. Feed someone who is hungry. Give the gift of yourself – for the gift of who we are was given to us in order to be given away.

The secret to practicing resurrection is in giving who we are and what we have completely, wholly away to something greater than ourselves – in escaping from the circumstances and choices that entomb us and entering into new life here and now. In life and in death, Jesus modeled this generosity and transformation for followers then and now. As we embrace resurrection as a credible and meaningful principle for living, we, like Jesus, may become more than anyone around us – or even we ourselves – could have imagined.

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