

# **ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK—**

## **WHY EASTER IS STILL WORTH CELEBRATING**

### **A dead Messiah and a failed kingdom**

To those who had known him best while he was alive, Jesus' death meant one thing: he had been wrong. Peter and John and the other disciples had followed Jesus for around three years. During that time they'd come to believe that Jesus was the "Messiah," that is, the great king from God that Israel had been waiting for. But a dead Messiah was a failed Messiah. There was nothing else to it. The Messiah was supposed to establish the kingdom of God and restore Israel. If the so-called Messiah was instead humiliated and killed, then it showed very clearly that he was not, in fact, the one Israel had been waiting for. God wasn't about to let his king die! There are signs that this is what Jesus' followers thought after he had been crucified: Jesus was wrong; a dead Messiah was no Messiah at all! They were scattered and devastated and that was that.

Except that it wasn't. Against everything we would expect, Jesus' followers didn't die out. Instead, we find the incredible rise of the early Christian church. From a group of a few scattered losers, quickly grew a movement that would one day dominate the Roman empire. The disciples of Jesus changed overnight into passionate, committed, revitalized evangelists, who started telling anyone who would listen that Jesus was Lord and Messiah; and who were often killed for saying this. The reason they gave for this behaviour is very clear: they believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead. As Peter explained speaking to a large group of people in Jerusalem shortly after Jesus' death, "this man... you crucified and killed... But God raised him up, having freed him from death" (Acts 2:23-4). The early church was a resurrection movement. Everything they thought hinged on their belief that Jesus had not stayed dead, but had been raised to life as king of the world. Jesus' scattered, demoralized followers turned, almost overnight, into a resurrection movement that changed the world.

This begs the question: how can we explain this? There has to be an explanation for this transformation, because this was not the logical thing to happen. The logical thing to happen was for the Jesus movement to just die away, never to be heard of again. So, we need to ask: why did this happen? Why did the early Church come to exist, and to exist as a resurrection movement?

## **The early Christian explanation**

The early Christian answer is very clear, and is found in the stories at the ends of all the gospels. The version in Matthew's gospel is a good example. It goes like this:

*After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." (Matthew 28:1-10)*

The tomb was empty; they met Jesus alive. Together, these two things led to an obvious, but incredible conclusion: Jesus had been raised from the dead. If the tomb had been empty, but no one had met Jesus, then the explanation would have been very ordinary: someone had stolen Jesus' body. On the other hand, if people had met Jesus, but his body had still been in the tomb, then it would have been mysterious, but no resurrection. It would have had to be some kind of vision, or dream, or ghostly appearance. But together, an empty tomb and meetings with a well-and-truly alive Jesus, led to the unavoidable conclusion that Jesus had come to life again after being dead. Amazing as it was, this had to be the explanation.

But can we believe this? Can we possibly be expected to believe that this all actually happened, and that Jesus rose from the dead?

Some might say, "No! Science has proved, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that dead people don't rise. Therefore, we know for sure that Jesus didn't." This has something to it. However, it's worth saying that the fact that dead people don't come to life again was not exactly news to people in Jesus' day. The first Christians were well aware that dead people didn't normally come back to life. Yet they still claimed Jesus had. What's more, we still need an explanation. Few would argue with the assumption that dead people don't normally stop being dead, but we still need to explain why the early church started believing what it did.

## **Alternative explanations?**

So is there another explanation? Here are the main alternative explanations that have been suggested:

*(1) The disciples stole the body*

We might suggest that Jesus' disciples stole the body. This seems to have been the first ever alternative explanation, as it's even recorded in Matthew's gospel (Chapter 28, verses 11-15). However, there are many reasons why this is very unlikely. For one thing, if Roman guards fell asleep on duty they were executed. For another, Jesus' disciples were in no shape to steal his body that night: they were completely demoralised. And there'd be no point! If he was dead, he had failed. Why would they have bothered keeping on believing in him? Also, on this explanation we have to imagine Peter and the other disciples proclaiming the message of Jesus' resurrection, and even being killed for it, knowing that it was a lie. This explanation has serious historical difficulties.

*(2) Jesus didn't really die*

As a second possibility, perhaps we might say that Jesus didn't really die. He just almost died and then, perhaps, recovered in the tomb. This, however, is at least as difficult to believe as the first alternative. The Romans knew how to kill people. They were very good at it, and all the evidence is that they were successful with Jesus. But even more importantly, the reappearance of a half-dead, exhausted Jesus would hardly be likely to make his followers think, as the apostle Paul put it a little while later, "death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54). It would be more like: "death has been narrowly escaped for a short period of time." A half-dead Jesus would hardly have been evidence of a great, triumphant victory over death!

*(3) The disciples had some sort of "experience" of Jesus*

The reality is, not many people who've thought about it for long hold these first two views. But a third alternative is one with many variations, and can claim more support than the others. Basically, the argument goes that rather than meeting the real, physical, risen Jesus, Peter and Paul and the other disciples had some sort of experience of Jesus. Either they "experienced his exaltation," or they had a dream or a vision of him, saw his ghost, "experienced his grace," or perhaps became convinced that "he had been right about God" or something similar. As a result they spoke of Jesus as being "resurrected" and continued on the movement he had begun. According to this explanation, the stories in the Gospels are inventions by the early church. Now this seems like it might be plausible. Is it?

Actually, there are a number of serious problems with this hypothesis, which many scholars, Christian and non-Christian, have pointed out.

(i) First, when the early Christians spoke of "resurrection," it is simply impossible that they were talking about a vision or an experience. The word "resurrection" had a very particular meaning. It meant for someone who had

been really dead to become physically alive again. This is what it meant in the Old Testament, and in other literature of Jesus' time. What's more, the early Christians knew what visions and "experiences of grace" were. They speak about them at various other places. They even know what "seeing a ghost" was like (see the interesting story in Acts 12:6-17).

(ii) Second, this kind of hypothesis about what happened is a woefully inadequate explanation for the shape of the early church. As we've seen, the early church was a resurrection movement, speaking about bodily resurrection from its earliest days. The first Christians believed that because Jesus had been raised from the dead, those who trusted in him would also one day be raised like him (see, for example, 1 Thessalonians 4:14). The idea of some sort of spiritual experience is simply inadequate to explain these dramatic and remarkable ideas.

(iii) Third, according to this model, at some point the early Christians shifted from speaking of an "experience" to speaking about a bodily resurrection. But such a shift is very hard to imagine. The idea of someone being physically raised to life is much stranger and much harder to believe than the idea that Jesus "lived on in the memory of his followers," or something similar. Therefore it's unlikely that a change would be made in this direction.

(iv) Forth, this argument has trouble doing justice to the Gospels. For a number of reasons, the resurrection stories in the gospels just don't look like they were made up. For one thing, they are surprisingly straightforward accounts, with very few extra comments about what Jesus' resurrection meant, etc. For another, they describe Jesus in ways that would be very strange if they were invented.

But perhaps the most interesting piece of evidence is that all the gospels report that the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection were women. Now this is no problem for us; but in the first century Jewish world it was a big deal, because women were not accepted as legal witnesses. So the argument that the gospels were invented requires us to imagine Matthew or Mark sitting down to invent a resurrection story, and deliberately placing at its centre people whose testimony was considered worthless. It seems, at the very least, unlikely.

These significant problems with the alternatives on offer should force us to consider again the early Christian explanation: early that Sunday morning the women went to the tomb, found it empty, and then met Jesus alive. Incredible as it is, there are good reasons to think this explanation is the best historical option, and that the early church was a resurrection movement precisely because Jesus had been raised from the dead. This cannot be proven like a maths problem. History is not like maths. When we look at history, we can't prove things, we can only weigh up evidence. But as far as this weighing up goes, the

explanation we find at the end of each of the gospel accounts has a lot going for it.

### **Meeting Jesus today?**

We can be sure that this was as startling and impossible and unbelievable for Jesus' first followers as it is for us. Their reactions when they met Jesus on a mountain in Galilee show this:

*Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:16-20)*

Jesus explained for the disciples what his resurrection meant. He hadn't just come back to life. He hadn't just been given a few more years. No, his being raised from the dead meant much more than this. When the disciples met Jesus on the mountain they worshipped him. They worshipped him because they realised that what he said was true. Jesus had been given "all authority in heaven and on earth." He was in charge. He was the Lord of the world, the king of heaven and earth, and he was the king of each of them. Jesus was in charge, and the only appropriate response was to worship him and trust him and obey him.

This is why Easter is important. The resurrection is not just a strange event from the past. On that first day of the week Jesus became Lord of all things forever, so that he's still alive now and still Lord now. This is not just a message or uplifting idea, nor some good moral teaching; and it's truth doesn't depend on whether we believe it. This is just how the world is now.

People have different responses to the idea that Jesus was raised from the dead. Some dismiss it out of hand as impossible; others think it is irrelevant and not worth worrying about; still others might believe it's ok for some, but not them. Hopefully what's written here will have challenged all these views in one way or another, and provoked you, the reader, to think again about the historical evidence and universal importance of this event which, according to Christians, is the greatest thing that ever happened.

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