

Did Christ Rise From The Dead?

By Joseph Grech

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In this pamphlet we have a careful and critical examination of the scriptural evidence for the central mystery of the Christian faith -the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb. The author goes on from that point to discuss briefly the reality of the Risen Christ living in His church. -THE EDITOR

I

St. Paul writes, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless, and your believing it is useless... If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are the most unfortunate of all people." (1 Cor. 15:14). This is a very big claim. On the other hand it clearly portrays St. Paul's attitude towards the Resurrection. This event, is the foundation of all Christian belief. For us, men and women of twenty centuries later, the Resurrection is not only a past event. It is the pivot of all our beliefs and hope in Christ. Some may ask us, "Why do you still believe in such fantasies?" Our reply is that we have proof that Christ really rose from the dead, and this proof is mainly found in the New Testament. Now the purpose of this pamphlet is to grasp what the New Testament claims in preaching Jesus risen from the dead, and to analyse why this proclamation can be accepted today.

The whole of the New Testament has in view the same event, by which Jesus who was dead passed into life. The Resurrection of Jesus is, the focus of everything proclaimed in the New Testament, including its statements about the relationship between God and man. In fact in I Thess. 1:10, we find St. Paul saying, "You are now waiting for Jesus, His son, whom He raised from the dead, to come from heaven to save us from the retribution which is coming." Similarly in the Church, this New Testament conviction is fundamental to the whole Christian tradition as St. Paul himself affirms in 1 Cor. 15. In this letter, St. Paul gives evidence that in the early Church, the resurrection is of fundamental importance being the focus of all belief in Christ. In fact he says, "Well then in the first place, I taught you what I had been taught myself, namely that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; and that he was raised to life on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures; that he appeared first to Cephas and secondly to the twelve".

Moreover, the New Testament furnishes us with two important events, as a proof of Christ's resurrection: (A) The appearance of Jesus to his followers after his death, and (B) the empty tomb.

II

The Appearances

The earliest document that clearly describes Christ's appearances to his followers, is St. Paul's report in I Cor. 15:1-11. When examining this report, one must in the first place emphasize that it is very close to the events themselves. This is a very important factor to remember, because there is no danger of "inauthenticity with regards to the events as they occur in the narrative of this particular letter of St. Paul". This closeness of the events factor involves first of all the time when St. Paul wrote the letter and secondly the age of the formula, which St. Paul used in his narrative. Scholars

can now ascertain that verses 3b-5 which read, "That Jesus died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve", form part of an older formula, originally in Aramaic, which St. Paul had already found in use. This is especially clear when we find the phrase, "according to the scriptures", repeated twice.

Now, St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians was probably written in the spring of 56 A.D., in Ephesus. This was before any of the gospels were written. However, St. Paul speaks from a still older personal knowledge. According to his letter to the Galatians 1:18, we are certain that St. Paul was in Jerusalem three years after his conversion. There he, at least, visited Peter and James. St Paul's conversion was in 33 or in 35 A.D. and if Jesus' death is to be put approximately in the year 30; then Paul would have been in Jerusalem; between six to eight years after Christ's death. From this it can be seen that the statements in 1 Cor. 1:15, are very close to the actual event of the resurrection.

This observation is further strengthened by another fact, at which we have already hinted, namely that St. Paul is also using a formula that was previously coined. This formula was perhaps preached or recited by the early Church at worship. Thus St. Paul does not make statements straight from his memory, which anybody could doubt. Rather, he appeals to a formulated tradition which was nearer still to the actual events. In fact some hold that if St. Paul had received this passion formula soon after his conversion, which was probably the case, it must have reached back to the first five years after Christ's death. Thus in view of this formula and the nearness of St. Paul to the alleged events, the assumption that the appearances of the risen Lord were really experienced by a number of believers and not perhaps invented later, has a very good historical foundation.

According to this account of St. Paul in I Cor. 15:1-11, and the sacred gospel accounts, it was the appearances and not the empty tomb that was decisive for the disciple's faith. St. Paul gives us a detailed list of appearances in the passage just mentioned, "Next he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died; then he appeared to James, and then to all the apostles; and last of all he appeared to me too; it was as though I was born when no one expected it." As we read the account of these appearances, we can see that three major aspects stand out. (1) the witnesses; (2) their location; (3) their form.

The Witnesses

The common feature in all the appearances is that they were granted to those who were already followers of Jesus. More important is the fact that when Jesus appears, all the witnesses recognize him as the same Jesus Christ who talked to them, who taught them, who performed miracles, and who died on the cross. Thus there is no question of a mistaken identity. This is quite easily proved from 1 Cor. 9:1; Gal. 1:16 and I Cor. 15:8-10. These three passages show us what happened to St. Paul on the road to Damascus.

Here he clearly tells us, that he became Christ's follower and, moreover a preacher of Jesus, precisely because he had seen the risen Christ. "I personally, am free: I am an apostle and I have seen Jesus, our Lord". (1 Cor. 9:1.)

Again, we can say that the consistent record of the New Testament is, that the visions of Jesus after the resurrection did not lie within the natural power of any who might have wished to see Him. Christ did not return for a public inspection, like Lazarus. The initiative lay always and only with Jesus in making himself visible. This is a proof against those who argue that these appearances were merely a figment of the imagination. In fact in the Acts of the Apostles we read "Yet three days

afterwards God raised him to life and allowed him to be seen, not by the whole people but only by certain witnesses God had chosen beforehand." (Acts. 10 : 40-41).

To us, these appearances were assurances to those who believed in Him, that their hope in Him, was not in vain. He wanted to show them that, in reality, their salvation could only be possible through Him; for He has now conquered evil.

The Location

There is no uniform tradition as regards the place where these appearances were witnessed. In the gospels we find that these appearances occurred in Jerusalem and in Galilee. It is quite difficult to harmonize these variant traditions.

However, it could be argued that these appearances really occurred in both places. In fact, some theologians have suggested, quite reasonably I think, that the appearances as shown happening in the gospels; first at Jerusalem, then in Galilee and finally again at Jerusalem, could well hint at where the disciples were, first during the feast of the Passover, secondly between the feast of Passover and that of Pentecost, and finally during the feast of Pentecost.

The Form of the Appearances

With regards to the character and form of the Easter appearances, the first thing to be considered is that they may have involved an extraordinary vision, and not an event that was visible to everyone. This can be clearly seen from the Damascus event. It was impossible for St. Paul to be unaccompanied, for the Sanhedrin . would not commission Paul to imprison the Christians of Damascus without an escort of soldiers. Thus, there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the account of St. Paul's journey given in the Acts of the Apostles. However, this does not mean that what was seen was imaginary. This fact had made some say that there are divergencies in the form of the appearances, and that while Paul witnessed to a purely spiritual vision, they are represented as progressively more materialistic as the gospel tradition develops. However, and this is the most important thing, all the appearances in the gospels depict the same phenomena as experienced also by St. Paul, namely that of a body identical with that of Jesus. It was a changed body for it transcended the limitations of the flesh, yet it was at the same time capable of sharing itself in the same ways of the flesh.

At this point, I would like to remark about the terms 'glorified' and 'spiritual' when referring to the state of Christ's body after the resurrection. I agree with such terms only so far as they do not imply any doubt on the physical resurrection, and only as long as they do not turn Jesus into a ghost.

The Identity of Jesus

Again, the apostles and even St. Paul stress the identity between the risen Lord and the Jesus whom they knew and remembered. Let us not forget the famous expression of doubting Thomas, "My Lord and my God". Is it mere coincidence that the one who most doubted the resurrection of Christ, should make the boldest affirmation of belief? Would St. Thomas say, "My Lord and my God", to a mere phantasm? And did he touch the body of an imaginary ghost? Can we sincerely believe that St. John is lying, when in chapter twenty of his gospel he describes this encounter? Let us also remember, that it was these appearances that transformed the apostles from being cowards (they fled during our Lord's passion) to courageous believers.

THE EASTER APPEARANCES ARE NOT TO BE EXPLAINED FROM THE EASTER FAITH OF THE APOSTLES.

To maintain first of all that the appearances were produced by the enthusiastically excited imagination of the apostles, does not hold at least for St. Paul. Before his conversion, St. Paul was an enemy of Christ. He did not even recognize Christ as a prophet but as a heretic, the usurper, still less as God.

The apostles themselves, on the other hand did not believe that Christ would rise from the dead. Let us not forget the disciples of Emmaus. They recognized Christ only after He broke the bread and disappeared. It is true that Christ had repeatedly announced his resurrection, but the disciples were never able to grasp its meaning, through no fault of theirs, for they had never experienced such an event.

ALL WE CAN SAY IS, THAT THE EASTER FAITH OF THE APOSTLES IS TO BE EXPLAINED FROM THE APPEARANCES.

Incredulous Apostles

Again, it has been asserted that Jesus' disciples were prone to visions and that the manifoldness of the appearances may be explained through a sort of chain reaction resulting from the first appearance to St. Peter.

Now, first of all they could not have been prone to visions about the resurrection for they were simply incredulous that Christ would rise from the dead. Secondly, there could not have been a chain reaction, for the individual appearances did not follow one another so quickly and in the same place. For example, St. Paul witnessed the risen Christ, three years after Jesus' earthly end in Jerusalem, on the road to Damascus. St. Peter, on the other hand, witnessed Christ in Jerusalem itself and only a few days after Jesus was buried.

Thus all the evidence points to one end, namely, that Christ really appeared to his disciples, and that the disciples really saw Christ, they recognized Him and were positive that it was no illusion. In fact everything that they built, that is, God's people in a universal Church, has its foundation in these appearances.

The Empty Tomb

None of the evangelists describe the actual resurrection itself not even St. Matthew in his long narrative of the passion at the end of the gospel; because it was not witnessed by anyone. The gospels and St. Paul witness to the fact of the resurrection, however, by testimony to the appearances, as I have already shown, AND TO THE EMPTY TOMB. It is not however correct, to distinguish two forms of this testimony as though the idea of the empty tomb had been an afterthought; an attempt to objectivize what had already been originally a subjective experience of the apostles.

The earliest records that we have do not specifically mention the empty tomb. Consequently, the empty tomb has been held to be a development of a false tradition. However, even in the pre-gospel tradition, as far as it can be seen from the Pauline letters and the Acts of the Apostles, the empty tomb is certainly implicit.

In 1 Cor. 15:4, we find, "that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures."

In Acts 2:31 we find, "he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption."

Again, in Acts 13:29-30 we have, "and when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him down in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead."

Now, all these extracts imply belief in a bodily resurrection. However, when we turn to the gospels, their evidence on the empty tomb is in substance unanimous.

Paul's Silence

We may point out also that the trustworthiness of the report about the empty tomb is not shaken by the fact that St. Paul nowhere mentions specifically the empty tomb. The reason is because the event does not affect St. Paul's aim in his letters, namely the relation between Christ and all believers. But it was a different case with the apostles, and this is the reason why we find the empty tomb quite clearly mentioned in the gospels. How could Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem have proclaimed the resurrection if they could be constantly refuted merely by viewing the grave in which his body was laid? Paul Althaus, the Protestant theologian remarks, "In Jerusalem the place of Jesus' execution and grave, it (the resurrection) was proclaimed not long after his death. The situation demands that within the circle of the first community one had a reliable testimony for the fact that the tomb had been found empty. The resurrection kerygma could not have been maintained in Jerusalem, for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned." [including even the enemies of Christ!]

Some remark that at those times there existed a taboo, against the opening of graves, and thus the story of the empty tomb is a mere fable. This, in the opinion of many scholars, does not hold ground for it is historically proved that at those times the Roman authorities had felt the necessity to make laws prohibiting the stealing of bodies from graves. It is also very interesting to note that the Jewish authorities were sure that the tomb was empty. Wolfhart Pannenberg, in his book, "Jesus God and Man", remarks that the Jews would have every interest to preserve a contrary report. "However, quite to the contrary, they shared the conviction with their Christian opponents that Jesus' grave was empty. The Jewish polemic limited itself to explaining this fact in its own way, which was detrimental to the Christian message."

He Was Buried

On the other hand, there is no doubt, that the body of Jesus was placed in the tomb. Both in the primitive Pauline summary of 1 Cor. 15:4, and in the Acts preaching in chapter thirteen verse twenty eight; Jesus' burial is specifically mentioned. Again, against the natural assumption that under Roman law, the body of Christ, as a condemned criminal would have been thrown in a lime pit, or let to rot, we have the firm tradition repeated over and over again in the New Testament that Christ was buried. They all confirm that Joseph of Arimathea, at the risk of losing his reputation within the Pharisaic circle, had Christ buried in a new grave. We do not suppose that the New Testament also incorporates lies.

Divergences in the Narratives

To be fair, we would like to mention that there are differences in detail in the gospels. It is a well known fact, however, that these differences have oftentimes been exaggerated. There are variations of names, in the number of the women who visited the grave and in their motives. [All of this is easily explainable.] There are various descriptions of the figure or figures at the tomb and there is

also a divergence about what these figures said and how the women reacted. [Again, easily explainable.] None of these however, is the kind of difference that calls in question the authority of the narrative. The very fact that there is no uniformity in secondary facts tells against any subsequent fabrication or agreed story.

The basic fact, the resurrection itself, is common in all sacred New Testament writers. All in all, one can say that the faith in the resurrection did not depend on the fact that everyone had the same story. Nor should too much be made of the divergences. The resurrection is the most unique event in the gospels. Now, confusion in details is rather to be expected especially if your source is tradition, as in this case.

Unanimous Basic Narrative

If we leave the details of description aside, the basic witness is extraordinarily unanimous. It is that Jesus, through the aid offered by Joseph of Arimathea, was first wrapped in linen and then given a hurried burial in a new rock tomb in Jerusalem. This tomb was then sealed by a large stone. Then, after the rest imposed by the Sabbath, some women came to the tomb in order to anoint Christ's body. But they found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty.

This turn of events was quite unexpected. To say that the empty tomb was the product of wishful thinking is to ignore the fact that it was the last thing that the women or the disciples could have wished. When they found the tomb empty, their sole desire was to recover the body. In the gospel of St. John chapter twenty verse fifteen, we find Mary Magdalen saying, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and remove him."

There are also some who suggest that the apostles stole the body. This could not have been the case for the simple reason that the apostles were cowards. When Jesus was confronted by the soldiers in the garden of Gethsemane, they all fled. They barricaded themselves in the "upper room", and did not venture out till Christ appeared to them. Even Peter, their leader, had been so afraid that he denied Jesus three times. They were simple people who always fled from danger, and it was only through the special gift of the Holy Spirit that later they had the courage to face danger and die for Christ.

Alternative Theories

Again, it is totally unfounded to say that some unidentified robbers took away Christ's body. The only alternative explanation is that either the women visited the wrong grave or that Jesus merely swooned on the cross and subsequently he could escape from the grave. As regards to the first proposition it is impossible for Mary Magdalen was present at the burial of Jesus.

Christ Had Died

Here I would like to mention that the gospels stress the fact that Christ died before he was pierced by a lance; however, I am emphasizing the centurion episode for a clearer proof that Christ really died. The second proposition ignores the fact that the centurion pierced Christ's side with a lance. Thus in reality Christ indeed was dead for no one could survive the piercing of a lance in his chest after so much punishment. Moreover, the gospels tell us clearly that the Roman authorities made sure that Christ was dead before letting Joseph of Arimathea bury him.

Thus, all the evidence shows that Christ died, was really buried, and that after three days the tomb was found empty. This, largely supported the belief that Christ rose from the dead, and this fact was

substantiated by Christ's appearances. While referring to the empty tomb, N. Clark writes, "The empty tomb stands as the massive sign that the eschatological deed of God is not outside this world of time and space or in despair of it, but has laid hold on it, penetrated deep into it, shattered it, and began its transformation." On the face of it, it looks the most public and solid piece of evidence.

IV

Our Experience of the Living Christ Today

I see the proof of the resurrection in the experience of the living Christ, today. If the appearances had been merely an imagination or an invention of the apostles, one would expect the idea that Jesus was alive, to have grown progressively less vivid once they had to face danger and martyrdom for that belief. Yet, and this is the most interesting fact, the conviction became more settled once the appearances had ceased. This was due to the Holy Spirit whom Christ promised as a protection, in the apostles' mission. St. Paul in Galatians 2:20 writes, "and I live now not with my own life, but with the LIFE OF CHRIST WHO LIVES IN ME."

Similarly, it was to the signs of the living Christ, [the miracles,] to "the work which you see and hear", (Acts 2:33), "to the powers now at work in his name" (Acts 3:15-16), that the first apostles appealed, as much as to the events they witnessed, for the testimony to Christ's resurrection.

The Church and The Resurrection

The very existence of the Church is itself a major proof of the resurrection. The Church came into being, precisely because the apostles became filled with unbelievable courage, when they saw the risen Christ. We have only to remember the words of St. Peter's first speech to the crowds that occurred immediately after Pentecost. In the Acts of the Apostles chapter two, verses thirty two to thirty four we find;

"God raised this man Jesus to life, and all of us are witnesses to that. Now raised to the heights by God's right hand, he has received from the Father the Holy Spirit, who was promised, and WHAT YOU SEE AND HEAR IS THE OUTPOURING OF THAT SPIRIT."

This is the most evident proof, because the continuing existence of the Christian Church, which lives by the experience of the resurrection, is a fact of history that is not open to doubt. No one can deny its existence, however sceptical one may be of the empty tomb or the appearances.

In the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles we find, (verse 3), "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." Now all these proofs mentioned by St. Luke, are not there simply as historical explanations of the apostles' faith, but as the acts of God to which all subsequent faith must remain in response.

The Role of The Spirit

Yet neither are the historical facts, by themselves, the witness. Let us not forget the Holy Spirit. Christ himself told the apostles that he had to die, that he would rise again on the third day and that he had to go back to the Father. He also promised to the apostles that he would send his Spirit to them. This happened. From cowards they became courageous witnesses of Jesus and did not deny him, even when faced with death. Thus even the Holy Spirit is a worthy witness to the risen Christ, for he was sent by him as a guide. In Acts 5:32, we find, "We are all witnesses to all this, we and the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." Without the Holy Spirit, the Church

could have never come into being, and could have never repulsed all the dangers and the difficulties that the powers of evil continuously hurl against her.

This faith and this help by the Spirit led to the very composition of the gospels. The sacred books are nothing else than the faith of the early Church in Christ under the guidance of the Spirit. Keeping this fact in mind, J. A. T. Robinson remarks, "This sign of the Spirit is the experience of the living Christ, in those who believe in him and in the church, and the indispensable internal testimony. WITHOUT THIS, JESUS MIGHT HAVE BEEN RAISED BUT COULD NOT HAVE BEEN PREACHED AS RISEN."

THE MEANING OF THE RESURRECTION

We have just seen that the New Testament provides us with a basis for our belief in the resurrection. Its truth has been established. But we may ask, is the resurrection an event that happened a long time ago, and thus has no meaning for us today? Is it ONLY important as the foundation stone of the Christian faith and of the Church? For us, as Christians, it has still a very important meaning. It is the fact on which our faith depends.

Without Christ present among us as he promised, what value would our faith have? We believe in the resurrection, because we believe in Christ. We have just established a kind of historical proof for the resurrection, but for us the word of Christ has the greatest value. We cannot forget Christ's words to St. Thomas, "You believe because you can see me. Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Thus because we believe in the risen Christ, we, each one of us can say with St. Paul, that, "it is not I who lives, but that Christ lives within me." Our faith compels us to realize that we are not believing in a phantasm or in a ghost, but in Christ risen from the dead. Only in this truth can our faith make sense. If it were only based on an imaginary being, then it is right if others call us superstitious. But the resurrection makes us hope and trust in Christ.

The Resurrection and The Eucharist

Again, the resurrection gives a real meaning to the Eucharist. At the most solemn moment of the Mass, the Consecration, we know that because of the resurrection, we have Christ present, and not simply a memory. Because Christ is alive today, we know that Communion is not just a remembrance, but that we are really partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ.

How can we believe in Holy Communion, if we do not accept the fact that Christ is risen? Christ himself said, "Take you and eat it for this is my Body." These words really make sense to us because we know that Christ is not to be found among the dead. He is alive, he is at the right hand of the Father, and thus in a mysterious manner, He makes us share in the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

The same thing can be said about prayer. We pray because we believe in a personal contact with God. This can only be possible because Christ is still alive, and thus we can communicate with him and vice versa. What comfort could we find if we only pray to an idea, to a mere phantasm, or to an object that we ourselves created because we were forced to believe in Christ's resurrection without any proof.

The Individual and The Risen Christ

As an individual, my Christian commitment, makes sense only because Christ is still present in the heart of all those who seek to do his will. Christ said, "Follow me", and I followed. Where am I to

follow him; to a grave and to a heap of bones in Jerusalem? Not at all; I am going to follow him because he said to me, "Lo, I am with you even to the end of the world." This is Christ's promise to us. This is why I have hope in Christ, and because I have hope in him; because I believe that he is always with me in body and soul; then I am very willing to commit myself to him. Ernst Bloch says that hope generates commitment. This is the case in my own life.

I believe in the resurrection; this belief generates a hope in Christ that I will rise with him at the end of time; and this hope makes me follow a commitment. Christ promised those who follow him a place with him in the Kingdom of his Father. Christ cannot lie, and his promise cannot be fulfilled if he is dead. It will be fulfilled because he is alive now. That is why for me the resurrection means salvation and that one day I too will rise from the dead.

A Basic Fact

Thus for us as Catholic Christians the resurrection is the basis for everything, for our life, for our beliefs and hopes. The resurrection inaugurated a new and better way of relationship between God and man. Now Christ has done his part. He has shown to us the true way, he even died for us to prove his love for us, and in order that we might yet still know for certain that he is God, he rose from the dead.

Still living in the Church through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christ is inviting every one of us to come to a closer relationship to him. The only thing that remains is for man to make his response. God has proved himself too much and too often. Now it is our turn to prove ourselves by striving to do the will of the resurrected Lord.

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