

**THE
RESURRECTION
OF JESUS
CHRIST:
AN EASTER
SERMON**

*by Rev.
Clinton Chisholm*

We must be absolutely clear that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is at once the lynch-pin and the Achilles heel of Christianity. On the issue of the resurrection, Christianity is either most invincible or most vulnerable.

There is a simple point though that is not featured much in the writings of conservative scholars which I ask us to ponder at the very outset; the New Testament nowhere provides evidence of any witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it simply offers evidence about witnesses to the resurrection. No one saw Christ **being raised** from the dead yet the early Christians believed and preached that he **was raised** from the dead, because of the empty tomb and because of the post-death/burial appearances of Jesus.

To put the issue in summary form then: the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a **deduction** based on the **fundamental data** of the empty tomb and post-death/burial appearances of Jesus. Analysts of the documents of the New Testament and of the related literature of the first century must decide whether this deduction is logical or lunatic.

The burden of this paper is not to take the reader through the evidence and the argument in defense of the logical nature of the resurrection deduction because this is very adequately dealt with elsewhere.¹

Let me mention though a few things that make the resurrection deduction highly probable, plausible and credible.

Contrary to some scholars, there was nothing in Judaism that could bolster a belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Any belief in resurrection, as held by the Pharisees, was belief in the resurrection of **all the devout in the eschaton** (beyond time or history). Something strange but real must have happened to make these Jews believe, proclaim, suffer and give their lives for the doctrine of the

*Clinton Chisholm, M.A.,
Ph.D., (Cand.) is a
visiting lecturer at the
Jamaica Theological
Seminary and the
Caribbean Graduate
School of Theology.*

resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Thank God for the male chauvinism of Judaism, in this particular case; no sensible Jew of the day, writing a mere theological or mythical interpretation of the passion of Jesus, would have women as the primary witnesses of the empty tomb! Bear in mind that **all four** evangelists mention the fact that it was women who discovered the empty tomb (*Mt. 28:1-10; Mk. 16:1-8; Lk. 24:1-12; Jn. 20:1-10*). Since in 1st-century Palestine women *qua* women were regarded as unreliable witnesses, why give them such prominence in the account? The fact is, that is how it happened.

No explanatory theory of the Easter weekend has yet been advanced that commands more probability, plausibility and credibility than the doctrine of the resurrection. Reflection comes, in all likelihood, from one of the earliest New Testament documents and it will lead us to appreciate the fact that even on such a foundational issue as the resurrection of Jesus Christ, professing Christians can qualify as 'unbelieving believers', or as people who mouth pious platitudes which they do not really believe. The test is 1 Corinthians 15:1-20. In Corinth, a Greek city, chock full of philosophers and philosophies, some of the Christians were having problems with the idea of a resurrection. It was not so much that they were saying "the dead do not normally rise" (thereby making allowance for the odd exception). No. According to v. 12 **they were denying the very possibility of resurrection.** (The Sadducees had a similar view).

Mind you, these Corinthians were professing Christians, it was just that they **regarded resurrection as impossible non-sense.** Paul seeks to take their belief a step further to highlight what such a belief entails and implies. The Corinthian belief was not simply a difference of opinion that did not matter much. That belief was an unwitting attack on the very cornerstone of the Christian faith they professed. As far as Paul is concerned if **resurrection is in fact impossible then such a fact had revolutionary implications for Christian belief and behaviour and could not be taken lightly.**

Paul appeals to the ability of the Corinthians to reason logically and as he reasons with them two things surface: Paul's Argument and Paul's Affirmation.

1. PAUL'S ARGUMENT

1.1 A Reminder (vv. 1-11)

Whatever the gospel was, Paul reminds the Corinthians that it was preached to them and received by them. He reminds them that they are saved by the gospel and stand in it [vv. 1-2]. The key components of the

gospel are outlined in vv. 3-10, are three definitive statements.

Gospel Components

a) **‘Christ died for our sins according to the scripture’ [v. 3].**

Easter or passion week is not a season for dispassionate observers and celebrants of simply a religious tradition. No. Christ’s death was for **our** sins, He died in **our** place, in **our** stead. He was wounded for **our** transgressions... bruised for **our** iniquities, the chastisement that resulted in **our** peace was upon Him and by His stripes **we** are healed. Easter ought to have intensely personal significance for every worshipper because the gospel, built around the Easter events, declares that **Christ died for our sins.**

b) **‘Christ was buried and rose again the third day according to the scriptures’ [v. 4].**

No doubt, Paul had declared to them the doctrine that he articulated in Romans 4:25 “Christ was raised for our justification’. He was raised that we who are “in Him’ might be treated just as if we had never sinned. That is, the saving act of God in Christ would have been incomplete if Christ had died but was not raised from the dead triumphantly. Resurrection had to follow death and burial.

c) **The resurrected Christ was seen by numerous witnesses. [v. 5-10].**

The presence of eyewitnesses was important to the early preachers [1 Cor. 15:6], as Peter would argue in 2 Peter 1:16, ‘We have not followed cunningly devised fables (μυθοις) when we made known the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ but were **eyewitnesses** of his majesty.’ Paul seals the reminder in his argument in v:11. Irrespective of the preacher, the essence of the gospel preached and received was the same.

From reminder, Paul turns to mild **rebuke** in his argument, v:12. How can one claim to believe the gospel and doubt the possibility of a resurrection? Paul then shows the logical outflow of the belief held by them that the dead do not rise.

1.2 A Rebuke (vv:13ff)

- If the dead do not rise then Christ is not raised [v:13].
- If Christ is not raised then both Gospel and Faith are contentless (κενου, κενη)[vv:14].
- If Christ is not raised then Paul and his colleagues, as

preachers of the resurrection, are slanderers of God (perverse liars) [v. 15].

– If Christ is not raised, Faith is worthless, living Christians are still ‘in their sins’ and dead ones ‘lost’ or ‘done for’.

Verse 19 is a profound climax to the rebuke and we should all ponder it time and time again. Let me paraphrase v. 19 this way, ‘If death ends it all and there is nothing after, then Christians are to be pitied as fools’. Why so? Think of it, if there is nothing beyond the grave, why live your life walking a chalk-line of so-called Christian morality? To what defensible end is that? I have some problems with Andraé Crouch’s song which says, ‘If heaven never was promised to me neither God’s promise to live eternally, it would have been worth having the Lord in my life...’ How factual is that really and how much more viable would that kind of option be than any other in/for this life **alone**? Paul regards such a notion as a waste of time. Look at v. 32. Paul seems to be saying in essence, if there is no ultimate (that which is beyond death) then be preoccupied solely with the immediate (that which is before death). If death is final then the most defensible option is not conservatism but hedonism! Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die.

Ethics, righteousness and holy living make real sense only if there is an ultimate. So then, if, as some Christians were arguing, death is final, if, as they were saying, there is only the now, the immediate, then Paul says, Christians were and are idiots – living in the immediate as if there is an ultimate, living in the now as if there is a then to come.

2. PAUL’S AFFIRMATION (v.20)

Paul says, **Christ has been raised from the dead and he is the proof-sample of these who are asleep.** That’s good news and bad news! Since Christ is risen, resurrection is a fact and the ultimate is real. We must not miss the hidden point in the words ‘first-fruit of those who are asleep. Christ’s resurrection grounds the notion of a resurrection, especially for Christians, but as well for all who have died.

Since there is life after death, Christians are not to be pitied but patterned. They stand on a solid foundation for time and for eternity, for now and then, for this life and for the next. If that’s the case, the non-Christian is in serious trouble because resurrection will reveal for that one that the unsundered life represents an unwise preoccupation with the immediate, the now, and we need to remember that whatever is essentially immediate is also temporary, temporal and transient and can be removed by death.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a fundamental and logical deduction and a foundational doctrine in light of which we are encouraged to live as if there is a then to come because there is. 

NOTE

1. See the delightful dialogue between Don Cupitt and C. F. D. Moule in Don Cupitt's **Explorations in Theology 6**, (London: SCM press), 1979, 27-44; James D. G. Dunn, **The Evidence for Jesus**, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1985), 53-78; A. J. Hoover, **The Case for Christian Theism**, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 227-246; John Warwick Montgomery (ed.), **Evidence for Faith**, (Probe Books, 1991), 275-302. My oral text (audio cassette) **The Resurrection of Jesus: Saturday or Sunday, Fact or Fiction?**, 1990, also deals with the issues.