

## The Christ of the Gospel.

No. IV.—“ROSE AGAIN ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES.”

**B**ELIEF in the supernatural, if it is to be legitimate as well as genuine, has not merely to overcome the opposition of rationalism, the refusal to believe anything which eludes the understanding and defies explanation; it has also to avoid the temptation of credulity, the readiness to entertain conceptions which have no reliable foundation for their support. It is worthy of note that these two attitudes of mind, diametrically opposed to each other as they are, find common ground, nevertheless, in the mental process which gives to each its being: both depend for their activity upon prejudice. “The thing is possible, therefore it is,” is the argument of credulity: “the thing is impossible, therefore it is not,” is the argument of rationalism. *A posse ad esse* is the process of the one; *A non posse ad non esse* is the process of the other. Each process shows the same defect, the refusal to take account of evidence. Legitimate belief is the outcome of the sifting of evidence. True, it is as independent of ability to understand or explain the object of its activity as physical sight is, and it is ever moving into tracts unknown and discovering new realities; but for the direction of its activity it depends upon the use by reason of the finger-posts of evidence. And the question which reason asks before it bids belief move forward is not, What is the possibility of this having happened or being likely to happen? but, What does the evidence point to as having happened or being likely to happen? The refusal to accept that for which adequate evidence is not forthcoming must not be put down to a culpable absence of faith, nor is there a laudable presence of faith in the attitude which ignores evidence and acts independently of it.

Now, it is a striking fact that belief in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ won its way at the very beginning without the

assistance of credulity and in the face of strong rationalistic prejudice. There was nothing wrong with the evidence which was presented to Thomas. The men with whom he had companied for three years had not forfeited his confidence. Their testimony was that of eye-witnesses: they declared to him what they had seen. Moreover, it was not the testimony of an individual, but of the whole band of his fellow-Apostles; and it was confirmed by the women who owed their knowledge and joy in like manner not to hearsay and rumour, but to the evidence of their own eyes, ears, and hands.<sup>1</sup> There was nothing wrong with the evidence: indeed, short of the witness of his own eyes, Thomas could not have received more trustworthy testimony than that which was given to him. And yet in the face of it all he refused to believe. Why? The reason was prejudice, simple prejudice. The thing surpassed his understanding, it defied his power of comprehension, it transcended his experience: the thing could not be, therefore it had not happened.

Thomas was not alone in this rationalistic attitude. When Mary of Magdala related her experience to the Apostles, she was not believed.<sup>2</sup> The testimony of the two disciples to whom the Lord had manifested Himself on the road to Emmaus met with no better reception.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the wonder and the joy were so overwhelming that not even the sight of the Risen Lord was enough at the first to secure unhesitating belief.<sup>4</sup> The experience was too good to be true.

Here, as it seems to me, is the explanation of the necessity of the empty tomb in the Resurrection of the Lord. Was it necessary in order that the Lord might survive death? Assuredly not, or we must abandon the thought of survival altogether. Was the empty tomb necessary in order that the Lord might receive the spiritual body? It seems unreasonable to imagine any necessary continuity of that kind, a continuity depending on the transformation of the actual atoms laid in the

<sup>1</sup> Matt. xxviii. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Mark xvi. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Mark xvi. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. xxviii. 17; Luke xxiv. 41.

tomb. The mortal body grows and changes by the constant acquisition of new atoms, in such wise that the body of the man has no actual identity with the body of the infant; yet we find no difficulty in speaking of it as one and the same body in all its varied stages, because of the continuity of the *ego* which inhabits it. Moreover, while the atoms laid in the ground and reverently preserved from disturbance might conceivably be regarded as awaiting some new inbreathing of heavenly power, the idea ceases to have any meaning in the case of bodies devoured by animals or dissolved by the sea; and no theory of the resurrection body will suffice which is inapplicable even to one case. No, we cannot regard identity of atom as necessary for the resurrection body, and therefore we cannot regard the empty tomb as essential to the existence of the resurrection body of the Lord Jesus.

Wherein, then, lay the necessity? The phenomena of the Gospel narratives, to which we have drawn attention, seem to give the answer. We have only to ask what chance belief in the Risen Lord would have had amongst such an incredulous group of mourners, if they had found the tomb occupied by the Lord's body, in order to see at once the necessity. The empty tomb was necessary for the sake of evidence, for the purpose of assuring the disciples, for the object of producing conviction. The transformation of the actual body was an accommodation to the need of man.

We may go further still in this line of thought. It does not appear unreasonable to believe that a similar explanation is to be found of certain other characteristics of the risen body of the Lord—characteristics which lasted, at all events, for the forty days of His appearances to His disciples. That is to say, these characteristics were peculiar to His body for the special purposes which it had to fulfil, and were in no way declaratory of that which is to be the normal experience of the believer. I refer to such phenomena as the wound-prints, and to such experiences as eating and drinking. Does anyone believe that the loss of a limb will find some counterpart in the spiritual body? These

features of the resurrection body of the Lord present difficulties to our intellects, but the evidence for them is abundantly sufficient, the possibility of them is beyond our province to question, and the reason for them appears entirely adequate.

But to return from this digression, the Risen Lord was offering Himself to men for the faith which was to be the victory that was to overcome the world. If for this purpose the body in the tomb had to be transformed, the tomb to be emptied, and the body itself to be adapted for a time to the temporary sojourn amongst men, we have no objection that we can legitimately offer, with the one condition that the evidence is reliable. Let the issue be clearly stated. We can have no sympathy with the man who says that the thing was impossible, therefore the evidence is unreliable. And the objectionable feature of the rationalistic attack on the supernatural in the Gospel records is just this, that it starts with the prejudice against the thing, and then has to find some means of making away with the evidence.

The testimony to the empty tomb of Jesus Christ is such that no history could logically survive if it were rejected. The historical evidence of the Resurrection is as strong and complete as any evidence could ever be for anything; and the Risen Lord involved for the disciples the empty tomb. The fact that they found the tomb empty was one of the principal ways in which they were prepared for the shock of seeing the Risen Lord: they could never dissociate the one from the other. But, with the progress of thought and the advance of science, we of a later age can look back upon the necessity in a different light. We can see that it was necessary, not for the Lord, but for the disciples. Yet while this permits us to shift the focus of thought, and to acknowledge the possibility of a real belief in the Risen Lord which does not subscribe to the Apostolic interpretation of the empty tomb, it does not therefore follow that we can regard that interpretation as being no longer of any importance. If the transformation of the Lord's earthly body was necessary for the production of conviction then, the testi-

mony to the fact remains equally valuable as part of the historical evidence now.

In this connection the question may fairly be asked of those who reject the Gospel interpretation, as to what other adequate explanation they can offer of the triumphant belief in the Risen Lord. Do they leave the sacred body in the tomb, or in the possession of friends of the Lord, or in the possession of His enemies? Whichever way it is, the difficulty of explaining how the conviction was produced that the Lord had risen seems as insuperable as it is needless. If the body remained in the tomb, or was removed by enemies, the Apostles' witness could have been immediately disproved. If, on the other hand, the report of the soldiers represented, not a clumsy device, but actual fact, then either the triumphant testimony of the early disciples was a mere cloak under which they concealed their sorrow, or we must imagine that a matter of tremendous import at a time of popular excitement<sup>1</sup> was successfully kept as the bosom secret of the two or three who, so we must suppose, managed to evade the guards, steal the body, spread the false report, and produce the conviction that it was true. And this problem has to be faced, not because the evidence for the traditional explanation is inadequate or unsound, but because that explanation surpasses man's comprehension. So does the origin of life.

Although it is the fact rather than the significance of the Resurrection of our Lord that we are considering, a brief reference may be permitted, in conclusion, to the place which the fact occupies in Christian apologetic. The evidential value of the Resurrection must not be regarded as consisting in the mere fact of the manifested survival of death; for it is recorded of others that they experienced this, and the experience was not accepted in their case as a declaration of Divine Sonship. In like manner the miracles of the Lord are not, regarded by themselves, proofs of His Divine being; for it is recorded of others that they, too, performed miracles, and no such significance was

<sup>1</sup> Matt. xxvii. 62 ff., xxviii. 12 ff.; Luke xxiv. 18.

attached to them. Moreover, did not the Lord Himself promise that His disciples should do even more wonderful works than He had done?<sup>1</sup>

St. Paul's message to Timothy puts the fact of the Resurrection in its true relation. He bade Timothy remember, not the mere fact of the Resurrection, but "Jesus Christ risen from the dead."<sup>2</sup> It was the personality of Jesus which gave its evidential value to the Resurrection, as also to His miracles. It may be true—nay, it is true—that the Resurrection was a glorifying of Jesus, but it was so only because Jesus was the glory of the Resurrection. It was the fact of His wonderful personality, life, and work which made it possible for the Resurrection to be accepted as the seal and declaration of His Divine Sonship.<sup>3</sup> It was in accordance with the spirit of holiness that He was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection of the dead.

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[The fifth article in this series, "Ascended into Heaven," will appear in the May issue of the CHURCHMAN, and will be contributed by the Rev. A. W. Greenup, D.D.]

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<sup>1</sup> John xiv. 12.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Tim. ii. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Rom. i. 4.

