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The Significance of the Resurrection

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The assurance that Jesus Christ is risen manifests itself throughout the New Testament as the very well-spring from which issues the whole proclamation of the Gospel. 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain' (1 Cor. 15:14). Such are the words of the Apostle Paul who, together with the other apostles was, like Matthias on whom the earlier lot had fallen, a 'witness to his resurrection' (Acts 1:21). So far as we are enabled to trace the primitive preaching of the apostles, it never failed to set this declaration in a central place. On Mars Hill Paul was reported as preaching 'Jesus and the Resurrection'. Each of the canonical Gospels moves on to narratives of the Risen One, and in the epistles alike of St. Paul and of other writers it is the Resurrection Light which illumines their message. 'It is God who justifies, who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised from the dead . . . ?' (Rom. 8:33 f.). Beyond any question the record of the Gospels themselves was the work of men who lived in this assurance, and even as they portrayed Christ and Him Crucified it was in the sure knowledge that 'God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death' (Acts 2:24).

Since this is beyond question the perspective of the New Testament writers, one must acknowledge that surely Hoskyns was right to begin the lectures, which Archbishop Ramsey reports in his book on the Resurrection, by saying that as the subject was the Theology and Ethics of the New Testament, he must begin with the passages about the Resurrection!

Admittedly this perspective is very different from what we frequently meet today both among critics of the Christian Faith and among those who undertake to expound it for modern man. In India the conviction that essentially the Christian Faith is a body of moral instruction related to certain general ideas about God is very widespread. Such being so, it was not strange that a friendly Hindu critic of the book, *India's Religious Frontier*, should express surprise at its references to the Resurrection, and write to the author that surely he did not seriously entertain the belief that Jesus Christ actually lived again after

the Crucifixion. Similar in sincere surprise was the comment made by another friendly Hindu who had presided over a meeting at which a missionary had presented the faith in a Maharashtrian town, and who spoke generously of much of the address but regarded the closing references to Resurrection as an amiable evidence of harmless credulity that could easily be discounted without impairing the whole.

Not so different are the assumptions of the so-called modern mind which is so sure of its presuppositions that a remark like this one, quoted by Ramsey, could be duplicated a hundred times: 'The modern mind cannot accept the idea of a bodily resurrection for humanity'. This modern mind is extraordinarily sure that it has taken the precise measure of what can or cannot happen, and the Resurrection is ruled out *a priori* by such thinking. And today we are familiar with the writings of a fair number of theologians who are entirely respectful to this way of thinking and who in one way or another think it possible to reconstruct Belief without the Resurrection understood in any sense comparable to that of the New Testament.

An example of such thinking may be found in a book like Werner's *The Formation of Christian Dogma*, ably developed from the thesis that the key is the delay in the *Parousia*, and the restatement of the faith in the light of that fact. Werner lays some stress on a quotation from Epiphanius regarding a group of Jewish Christians in Asia Minor, who held that the Resurrection of Christ had not yet taken place, but would take place only with the general resurrection at the end of all things. One would, however, wish to question very seriously the assumption that this in any way reflects a primitive Christianity which knew nothing of the Resurrection. Instead, one would wish to ask why they should have raised the question itself, except because it was already part of primitive Faith. Here one may take up the point made by Alan Richardson in his *Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, namely that if learned Rabbis had constructed a doctrine of the Messiah on the basis of the Scriptures, they might indeed have pictured one who suffered, but as regards His vindication, it is not Resurrection of which they would have spoken, but of something more like an Assumption of Moses. That kind of theme we find in the Old Testament and in dependent apocryphal writings, associated with names like those of Enoch and Moses and Elijah. But every evidence suggests that the thought of a Risen Messiah came unexpectedly into the experience of the circle of disciples, and one would think it more convincing to believe that even the debate as to whether it had yet taken place or not would arise in that context, than that it was possible for a resurrectionless Gospel to develop independently. The example quoted does not seriously shake the point made by John Baillie that within the Christian Church of the apostolic age there is no trace of a Sadducean Christianity.

By the same token, one would meet the scepticism of the many interpreters who throw all the stress on the moral teaching of the Gospel, or even on those who are ready to look to the Cross without the Resurrection, by asking them if they could explain how there came to be a Gospel at all if the end of the story was the darkness of Good Friday. If indeed those who thought to destroy the Lord Jesus and His movement had had the last word on that day when He died, forsaken and derided, His followers scattered and in despair, whence sprang that mighty movement which in a few short years turned the world upside down? It makes more sense to read the movement in the light in which the New Testament itself shows it, a movement of joy and victory, a movement springing in power from the totally unexpected and totally convincing experience of Christ raised by the power of God.

If we seek the evidence for the Resurrection, then we must first depend heavily on the very fact of the birth of the Church. But, first, surely we must set aside an implication of many references to the modern mind, namely that in some peculiar way it was easier for the mind of the first century to believe that a dead man could live again. Actually there is no evidence of this whatsoever. What evidence there is of precisely the opposite sort. In Athens it was when he did speak of the Resurrection that Paul's hearers turned aside with mockery (Acts 17:32), and it was after he had challenged King Agrippa with his question: 'Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?' (Acts 26:8) that Paul moved on to his testimony of the Resurrection, to be interrupted by the incredulous Festus: 'Paul, you are mad: your great learning is turning you mad' (Acts 26:34). Greatly though a doctrine of resurrection had made headway in Judaism, the idea of a particular Resurrection was just as remote from experience and reflection in Paul's time as in ours. We must not therefore suggest that it was generally an easier thought than it is today. What is equally startling is the clear evidence of the New Testament that men brought up in the strictest monotheistic school of Judaism like the apostles should be found speaking of a historical figure like Jesus of Nazareth in language of utter devotion. But that this happened, and that it happened within at the most a few years of Easter Day, is beyond dispute. It is therefore precisely the fact of the Church itself which is the immediate and powerful evidence of the Resurrection. It is striking that John Baillie is able to quote from a man like Goguel in these terms: '... facts of a spiritual kind which, to my view, cannot in the last analysis be explained in any other way than by the action of Jesus upon the souls of His disciples'. In the same kind of context Ramsey has set forth the fact of the Church's existence in spite of Good Friday as central. It is the Church which is the Witness to the Resurrection and

the Church within which the power of the Resurrection is experienced.

This means, however, that we do here meet what is indeed a particular historical event, and not a general truth of reason. It is the testimony of the apostles that something happened, something in the midst of their history, and it is from this testimony that the Church lives. Here we have the various records of the Risen Lord being seen. The earliest of these records is what has been called Paul's sworn statement, the roll-call of witnesses which he makes in 1 Cor. 15. No reference here to the Empty Tomb, but citation of witness after witness, down to the challenging reminder about the five hundred, 'most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep' (1 Cor. 15:6). That the various records are not all on the same plane of first-hand testimony is to be frankly acknowledged. Important as the references are to the Lord meeting disciples again at table, we are puzzled by Luke's suggestion that He took and ate a piece of broiled fish, to prove his corporeality—we must agree with Baillie's reminder that such a partaking of 'corruptible' food would hardly have found a place in Paul's picture of the spiritual body. Similarly the colourful picture of Matthew, with the earthquake and the opened graves and bodies of the saints being raised (Matt. 27:51 f.), is obviously not from the most primitive layer of tradition. At the same time there are other narratives which, as was pointed out by C. H. Dodd, fit precisely the most strict form-historical criteria for factual accounts, incidents which, as Richardson has said, are 'starkly factual, neither symbolical nor allusive'. May we not also accept Ramsey's interpretation of the Emmaus story as conveying an atmosphere less of demonstrative proof than of 'the growing awareness of a miracle unexpected and hard to comprehend?' The discrepancies in the accounts, which stand without any attempt at harmonization, do not conflict at all with the authenticity of these testimonies but are rather in keeping with something which has happened beyond all natural order and precedent, the irruption into historical living of that which is beyond the thought of man. In all this there is a justification in recognizing as one of the most convincing of all testimonies the breathless tale of Mark 16:1-8, concluding as an incident, if not as the intended conclusion of the whole Gospel, with that sense of supernatural terror for this 'is not as other events in history. It is in truth the *Parousia*; the coming into the world of the life of the world to come'.

The fact of the Church, the testimony of those who saw Him—but there remains the tradition of the Empty Tomb. No doubt this does not appear in the primary testimony of St. Paul, and also this is the subject on which there is most scope for later elaboration. Yet one must accept the force of the argument of those who say that for Paul, as for any thinking Jew of his time, the idea of a purely 'spiritual' resurrection would have

been quite meaningless. He who dreaded the very thought of being found naked, by being bodiless, who spoke so confidently of a spiritual *body*, could not have spoken of a Risen Saviour whose resurrection was isolated in the realm of the spirit. The Gospels are concerned to deny that He whom they encountered was a mere ghost, this being the point of such incidents as that in St. Luke: 'See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have' (Luke 24:41). While the opposite kind of instruction is found in the Fourth Gospel, 'Touch me not'—'Do not hold me' (John 20:17) and 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (John 20:29), this does not affect the testimony in this Gospel also to one who is recognized. There is a corporeality about the Risen Lord which could not have been recognized if in fact His body had even then been undergoing corruption in the Tomb. What we need is to lay hold on the emphasis made so tellingly by C. S. Lewis that the glorified body, the spiritual body, is not something less substantial than the physical body; so far from being the shadowy, ghostly being that we tend to think it, it represents Reality beyond our imagining, that which is indicated by such a phrase as 'the weight of glory'.

Such then is the testimony: the fact of the Church, the testimony of those who saw Him, the tradition of the Empty Tomb. The testimony is rejected only on the basis of pre-suppositions, those who think it a thing incredible that God should raise the dead. If we are not bound by such pre-suppositions, here is the proclamation which alone makes sense of the New Testament as a whole. Thus Emil Brunner: 'We believe in the Resurrection of Jesus because through the whole witness of the Scriptures He attests Himself to us as the Christ and the Living Lord'.

This is not the occasion to attempt much further elaboration on the distinctive character of what it was that happened. It is to be noted that here, as concerning the death of Christ, the apostles declared that He had risen 'according to the Scriptures'. Scriptures quoted are like those passages from the Psalms, such as Psalm 2 or Psalm 110, which speak of the vindication of the King, and Isaiah 53 and other 'Servant' passages have the idea of vindication of the servant. Beyond these the scriptural testimony which they find to point to a rising again on the third day is meagre indeed and could hardly have been used as testimony unless events themselves had established the fact.

The fact itself was never claimed to be in the nature of a public event such as the Crucifixion had been. It was to witnesses chosen beforehand that He was manifest, not for the overwhelming of His enemies by a confrontation with him whom they had killed. St. Luke's Gospel preserves the judgement that the mere marvel that one who was dead has been seen alive

would not convince the unbeliever (Luke 16:31). Clearly it is to faith that He speaks, and clearly, as the apostles bear witness to what they have seen, it is as the Holy Spirit awakens faith that the reality of the resurrection becomes manifest afresh in the believing community. Bultmann states what many others would say 'the resurrection, of course, simply cannot be a visible fact in the realm of human history'. But the sheer power of the event, the power of the testimony, must make us discount Bultmann's further identification of the Cross and the Resurrection, which would explain the latter as simply the disciples' believing insight into the meaning of the Cross. Certainly the Cross is the Cross of victory, as the Fourth Gospel portrays it, but that there was an event which manifested that truth and which is recorded as the Resurrection seems equally certain on the testimony we have reviewed. Nor is this event to be adequately described by Streeter's famous picture of the 'telegram from heaven'. The vision of the apostles is not merely an inner private experience of each one. 'God raised Him up'.

It is in this testimony then that we realize the sharp distinctiveness of the New Testament faith. It is a point made powerfully by Leenhardt in his study of the Lord's Supper, the very emphasis which was laid in the Upper Room on His Body, which He was giving, commanding them to 'do this'. It is something remote from a Greek assertion of the immortality of the spirit, or a Socratic calm with which such a faith is ready in serenity to await death. The New Testament declares a bodily presence, but a bodily presence transmuted into the glorified body; it declares a continuity with Him who was Incarnate which is vital for the meaning of the whole, and it declares a victory which is final. The certainty which radiates through the New Testament is that this is not one more example of a raising of the dead such as we may find in the Old Testament story of the child raised by Elisha or in the Gospel stories like that of Jairus' daughter. These tell of a revival to life which is not final; it is the restoration of life in our normal natural conditions which must face death again. Instead what the Scriptures *now* proclaim is a victory which is final: 'Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him' (Rom. 6:9). It is because He lives that we shall live also.

As we now finally seek to draw out the lasting significance of the Resurrection we must first express the basic conviction that this is indeed not just one more 'doctrine' added to others which together add up to the Christian Faith. Nor is it, for that matter one piece of evidence, laid alongside such a tradition as that of the Virgin Birth, to buttress a belief in our Lord's divinity. The acceptance of either of these views underlies a willingness to relegate discussion of the theme to the last pages of a treatise on Christian Theology or even on Christology.

Rather it is to be recognized as fundamental to the whole Faith itself, the event in the light of which alone we can see Jesus and know Him as Christ and Him crucified, and consequently as the event in the light of which we may understand how He brings us to God. The Father to whom we turn in prayer and trust is He who has raised up the Saviour.

Passing on with that conviction to more particular matters, we underline in the second place the certainty that Christianity is a religion of the supernatural. As Aulen has expressed it for a multitude of theologians, 'Faith in Christ stands inseparably connected with Christ as the one who is active in the present'. When the postscript to Mark's Gospel says that 'the Lord worked with them' (Mark 16:20), it is merely expressing what is common to the whole New Testament faith which never for one moment reflects any idea of an absentee Lord, or the mere memory of a Leader who has gone. From the Pauline assurance of life in Christ, through the summons in the letter to the Hebrews concerning 'looking unto Jesus', to the awed vision of the book of Revelation of the living one, it is throughout the same. It is the living Lord who indeed is the exalted Lord, granted a name that is above every name, who dominates the Apostolic Church. Beyond any dispute whatsoever, if our faith is changed into a system of moral exhortation or deceived into defending itself as a human construct and aspiration, that is a total departure from the apostolic faith. There is a Gospel, and there is a Gospel which has power, only because Jesus Christ is alive.

But then this is He who died: 'I am the first and the last and the living one; I died and behold I am alive for evermore' (Rev. 1:18). Bultmann emphasizes the significance of the Resurrection faith which recognized that 'the risen Lord was He who had previously died on the Cross'. This is indeed fundamental to the assurance found in the message of the Resurrection, to the refusal of any docetic Christianity, to its separation from any spiritualization which by-passes the stark problems of life and death through which we must pass. It is the theme pictorially portrayed in the fifth chapter of the book of Revelation where the seer, overwhelmed with grief at the fact that there is none found with authority to open the sealed scroll, is comforted by being told that there is such a one: 'The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals'. And this indeed is the Lamb standing, as though it had been slain (Rev. 5:5 and 6). This is the heart of the assurance which is expressed in the words of the prophet: 'When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you' (Isa. 43:2a). It is the final confirmation of the truth of the word given to the Psalmist 'If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there' (Ps. 139:8). The Faith of the Resurrection then is that He lives and reigns who died, He lives and reigns who was Incarnate, who walked the paths of Galilee and was tempted

even as we are tempted. That is why we are given the boldness portrayed in the letter to the Hebrews, knowing who is our High Priest, who was not ashamed to call men brethren.

From this truth the Apostle Peter draws the powerful message of Hope: 'by His great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (1 Peter 1:3). Here he is entirely in line with that ringing certainty which marks St. Paul's letter to the Romans, where he declares that in all things we are 'more than conquerors through him that loved us'. This relies on that assurance of the finality of the Resurrection to which we have already given attention. Related to Him who is risen we have in fact passed from death to life, and it is wholly in keeping with this conviction that we understand that Baptism signifies identification with Him in His death and resurrection, and our Baptism is properly recognized as the beginning of the resurrection life. It is just because He is risen that Paul's preaching has not been in vain, and those who have received the Gospel of salvation are not 'yet in their sins'. And it is from this certainty that there springs the Christian Faith concerning the future which is not a shadowy argument about the immortality of the soul, but the assurance of the 'Resurrection of the body'. 'Because He lives, we shall live also'.

Finally it is from the Resurrection that there springs the great certainty of the cosmic significance of Christ and His Incarnation. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. In the Incarnation God declared the great significance of Creation itself, for here is no deliverance which simply lifts us away from the crass material; here is instead a Life Divine which is lived in and through the material creation. But here, too, when the rebellion of man has turned the material into an instrument of death, as men did when they nailed Him to the Cross, this is not the defeat of the purpose of God, nor is it the rejection of His creation. The Resurrection of Christ and His continued claim upon man declares afresh and unto the end the royal purpose in His whole creation. It attests the cosmic significance of the act whereby God raised up Christ Jesus from the dead, and while this is not at all an event or process of the natural order, nothing in all history has occurred which can compare with its significance for that natural order. Here is the certainty that this is not a closed system devoid of either meaning, and least of all that it is a system ultimately without any meaning in which light is balanced against darkness and good against evil without any victory. When in the immeasurable greatness of his power He raised Christ from the dead, he declared that victory, the victory of God whose name is love, who has established him above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named not only in this age but also in that which is to come. The ultimate significance of all things under the hand of God is in Christ, the risen one.